

# **The Technicalities of Doing Good: NGOs and the Administration of Civil Society in Namibia**

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## ETHICS

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## DECLARATION:

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I declare that, except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is entirely my own work, and that no part of it has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

## **Abstract**

The thesis analyses how NGOs define the meaning of civil society in Namibia through their everyday work. Based on 12 months fieldwork at the national umbrella for NGOs the thesis shows that this definition was mainly shaped by NGOs' administration of the everyday rather than the outcome of ideological debates about how to "do good". The thesis examines how dominant NGO practices reflect the basic tension between NGOs' activists claims and the bureaucratic reality of their work and in doing so speaks to debates about NGO agency, accountability and their relevance for development.

The thesis shows how organisations use formal criteria in reporting, networking, advocacy, fundraising and branding to continuously redefine what activism ought to be about and how "proper" civic organisations ought to behave. NGOs write reports to enhance their accountability and transparency, but the correct reporting form also delineates what counts as proper civic activism. They present networking as civil society's main coordinating mechanism, but meetings always call for more coordination and hence additional meetings. Advocacy does not only concern the relations between civic organisations and the government, but NGOs also use these relations to justify surveillance and control within civil society. Competitive fundraising does not blindly follow donors' demands, rather, through it NGOs create a canon of fundable and thus legitimate projects.

Finally, the branding of civic activism is not simply concerned with the promotion of civil society organisations, but is seen as an attempt to create a unified corporate image with a sharp distinction between proper and improper civic activism. Struggles over meaning are therefore shifted into contestations around technicalities. The administration of the everyday in civil society thus becomes the prime means to decide how to "do good".

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## **Glossary of Organizations and Acronyms**

ACBF	The African Capacity Building Foundation
AGM	Annual General Meeting
BWS	Breaking the Wall of Silence Committee
CACOC	Community-based AIDS Coordinating Council
CATS	Citizens for an Accountable and Transparent Society
CBO	Community-based organisation
CSMQ	Civil Society Management Qualification
CSO	Civil society organisation
FBO	Faith-based organisation
GCAP	Global Call to Action Against Poverty
IDASA	Institute for Democracy in South Africa
LAC	Legal Assistance Centre
LaRRI	Labour Research and Resource Institute
MoHSS	Ministry of Health and Social Services
NACSO	National Association of Community based natural resource management organisations
NANASO	Namibian Network of AIDS support organisations
NANGOF	Namibian NGO Forum
NDT	Namibia Development Trust
NEPRU	Namibian Economic Policy Research Unit
NQA	Namibia Qualifications Authority
NSHR	National Society for Human Rights
NPC	National Planning Commission
OSISA	Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa
OVC	Orphan and Vulnerable Child

PE	Programme Estimate
PH	Project Hope
PLWHA	People Living with HIV and AIDS
RACOC	Regional AIDS Coordinating Council
SWAPO	South West African People's Organisation
SWG	Sector Working Group
TRP	The Rainbow Project
VHB	Village Health Bank
WAD	Women's Action for Development

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## Chapter 1 Doing Civil Society

This thesis is about how we understand civil society in Namibia. Based on 12 months fieldwork at the national umbrella for NGOs the thesis analyses how non-governmental organizations define the meaning of civil society through their everyday work. Namibia has a small but vibrant NGO sector which makes it possible to investigate networks between organizations in a state that has been comparatively tolerant towards non-governmental organisations. Namibian case study can therefore examine the significance of civil society for development if the sector is not curtailed by a restrictive state. Civil society has been central in discourses on development in Africa, but has been unduly overworked. It is expected to encourage people's political engagement by teaching them the necessarily civic virtues in an arena for free association, to promote free market economies and to empower grassroots to hold the powerful to account.<sup>1</sup> The literature on civil society in Africa has often portrayed it as a particular sphere and the dominant language in civil society debates has been revealingly spatial, talking about civil society organisations as being close to grassroots, sandwiched between the state and family (Mamdani 1996) or too close for comfort to donors (Hulme/Ewards 1997). Civil society organisations were said to function as mediators between grassroots communities and the political elite. Ideas of hierarchy, scale and the communities' proximity to nature were therefore all blurred into this vertical image of civil society's position (Ferguson 1998). Chris Allen has pointed out that the multiplicity of its meaning has turned civil society into an analytically vacuous concept. Jonathan Spencer (1997) has made a related argument in political anthropology and pointed out that if everything is political we have no term left to describe the area in life that people themselves label "politics". Why then should we keep the term civil society and is there any analytically meaningful way to define the concept?

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Jenkins (2001) offers a careful dissection of the assumptions that civil society can promote three contradictory trends by supporting the transition to competitive politics, by consolidating democracy and by enhancing free market policies. As he rightly points out, if civil society was to contribute to one of these it is precluded to bring about the other two. The free market economies civil society is thought to promote would remove many decisions from the state and political community and thus undermine the consolidation of democracy. See also Ferguson 2006:96.

### *Civil Society in development – Why bother?*

As donors started to channel ever more aid to NGOs, the literature began to debate whether the concept “civil society” was relevant in understanding Africa at all. Donors “discovered” civil society in Africa at the beginning of the 1990s when civil society organisations were seen as driving force behind the global “third wave of democracy” (Huntington 1991).<sup>2</sup> They were regarded as the local voices demanding competitive elections (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997) and “sound” liberal economic policies. Academics and development practitioners saw them as the most important vehicle for realising neo-liberal democracy and development on the continent (Hyden 1997:4), as donors’ good governance agenda in international aid suggested that a reduced role of the state would mean that civil society groups could hold officials to account (Lewis 2002: 571). In this view civil society became indispensable for the successful transition to competitive elections in African states and donors very often believed that it could be created from scratch by funding the “right” organisations (Jenkins 2001; Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001). Based on the Gramscian view of civil society as sphere of hegemonic ideas, civil society was portrayed as a sphere of political solidarity at grassroots level (Bratton 1994; Ndegwa 1994; Monga 1996), voluntary and rich in the social capital that provided a platform for dissenting voices (Haynes 1997; Howell/Pearce 2001). It was the sphere of free associational life (Bratton 1994) opposed to the state (Bayart 1993; Chabal 1993; Harbeson et al 1994) that had been portrayed as overblown (Burnell 2001), weak (Migdal 1988), predatory (Fatton 1992; 1995) and incapable of “capturing” its rural population (Hyden 1980). Supporters of liberal policies have long entertained ideas about civil society as an independent sphere where individuals were taught the “right” values that would lead to better governance and liberal market economies (Williams/Young 1994; Williams 1996).<sup>3</sup> As James Ferguson (2006:91) pointed out, civil society, just like ‘development’ or ‘education’, had become an all-encompassing concept that no reasonable person could oppose because it was too broad to have a contestable meaning.

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2 Jean and John Comaroff (1999) point out that this re-remembering of civil society meant that civil society could be stripped off its ideological baggage and be represented as new.

3 See Sudipta Kaviraj (2001) for a critique of the idea that civil society could be promoted from the outside and an argument against imposing a thin layer of civil society on top of diverse social realities.

Critical accounts thus questioned whether civil society was relevant for development in Africa. They argued that civil society derived its meaning from historical processes that were highly particular to Western early capitalist societies. They argued that the “structural transformation of the public sphere” (Habermas 1991) that created civil society as distinct discursive realm between the state, the family and the economy in Western societies did not take place in Africa because of the nature of the colonial state and its political economy. They pointed out that there is no empirical evidence to support the argument that NGOs indeed oppose authoritarian regimes and deepen democracy (Allen 1995). Although African societies have a rich associational life, these associations do not necessarily promote civic engagement and are not automatically voluntary. Their membership is often determined by kinship, religion or traditional leadership, modes of belonging not recognised by the traditional concept of civil society as free and voluntary (Karlström 1999). In the critics’ view the concept of civil society hinders rather than helps understanding African development, because it denotes a particular form of association which is only rarely found African societies.

Another trend in the literature has argued that any analysis of civil society in Africa should try to understand “real existing civil societies” (Mamdani 1996:19) instead of determine whether the traditional (Western) meaning of the concept is relevant in Africa or not. The colonial administrations had used civil society as boundary marker to distinguish between citizens and subjects, and civil society continues to inform popular discourse in and on Africa (Lewis 2002) in international development which still promotes it. They concluded that civil society is relevant in Africa because the idea has concrete consequences for African organisations. The real question is therefore which form real existing civil societies take and what consequences civil society support has for development in Africa. This literature thus makes a strong argument for more empirical work on civil society organisations instead of continuing the theoretical debate about the relevance of an abstract concept. This thesis is intended to be a contribution to the ethnographic exploration of civil society by looking at relations between NGOs and their umbrella organisation in Namibia.<sup>4</sup> It demonstrates how a less certain interest in the dynamics of ‘doing civil

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<sup>4</sup> See justification of focus on NGOs below.

society’ avoids common (tacit) assumptions about its inherent value and its exact relations to states, markets and donors.

In this thesis I decided to follow my informants who referred to “civil society” as the joint initiatives and meetings between NGOs that were engaged in very different forms of social activism, ranging from traditional human rights campaigning to HIV counselling and to environmental research.<sup>5</sup> Civil society happened at the intersection of organisations’ activities when directors discussed issues they regarded to be relevant for all of them like governmental policies or the funding decline. These meetings were not concerned with the “core” activism of single organisations or particular projects. Civil society assumed thus a very different meaning from labels referring to individual organisations like NGO or community-based organisation (CBO). Civil society was a set of practices<sup>6</sup> and an empirical category, something that could be participated in and observed. Its meaning was acted out in meetings, minutes writing, and informal conversations over tea, in conferences and workshops.

NGOs, more than any other organisations, have been idealised as the manifestation of civil society (Lewis 2003). The two concepts were seen as so closely connected that authors tended to use them interchangeably.<sup>7</sup> These accounts often relied on a number of tacit assumptions about NGOs, most importantly that NGOs resemble private enterprises and that they were conducive to the operation of the free market. They also seemed to assume that by definition NGOs were closely connected to communities and therefore represented an authentic voice of grassroots.

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5 The thesis’ discussion of civil society focuses on NGOs and leaves out churches and Trade Unions. This is so because apart from specialised NGOs (like Labour Research Institute) NGOs hardly cooperated with trade unions in their everyday activism. Trade unions are comparatively weak and still closely associated with the government as they were set up by SWAPO in exile. Additionally I decided to include faith-based organisations as active members of NANGOF whose practices did not differ considerably from their secular peers, but to leave out the churches, because they hardly took part in any of the activities described here

6 See Alisdair MacIntyre’s (1992) definition of ‘practice’ below.

7 It is far from clear why and when authors talk about NGOs and when about civil society. The most articulated relation between the two that I found is that NGOs, together with social movements, church organisations and trade unions constitute civil society. The haziest boundary appears to be between NGOs and social movements because the literature hardly agrees on the degree of institutionalisation that distinguishes NGOs from social movements; in broad terms social movements are thought to be less institutionalised than NGOs and formed around particular issues (Mitlin 1998).

## **Do NGOs embody the principles of the free market?**

Sara Rich Dorman (2003) has stated most accounts on NGOs are written as consultancy style evaluation of entire NGO sectors and the organisations' efficiency in fulfilling their funding targets. The study of NGOs suffers from an overemphasis on individual case studies at the expense of proper theorization (Lewis/Opokah-Mensah 2006). The increase of evaluations was partly a reaction to long held assumptions that NGOs worked like idealised versions of private companies and had a natural affinity with free market principles. NGOs were thought to be diverse, small, flexible and efficient promoters of "development".<sup>8</sup>

NGOs were thought to be particularly successful in the local context, because they were believed to attract diverse local experts. It was suggested that NGO staff knew the place of their organisation's projects so well that NGOs could have a much better feel for communities' needs than any state bureaucracy ever achieved (Edwards/Hulme 1992, 1996). NGOs were said to turn their local expertise into good projects by means of a lean administration and could thus focus their resources on goal achievement without getting entangled in a web of administration.<sup>9</sup> This assumed lean administration was the main reason why NGOs could achieve "private sector levels of cost control and efficiency" (Hulme/Edwards 1997: 6). The absence of large bureaucracies was mainly responsible for NGOs' capacity to adapt to changing circumstances. As Richard Sennett (1998:46) has argued this capacity to adapt to changing environments, a tolerance of fragmentation and the ability to pursue many possibilities simultaneously, all contribute to a particular kind of flexibility highly valued in capitalist economies and also praised in NGOs. Many different organisations were thought to contribute much more efficiently to the overall goal than one larger entity could do. Decentralised activism was said to be more efficient than centralised planning of large state bureaucracies. This assumption mirrors a common idea about the advantages of deregulated markets (Friedman 1962; Kay 2003) which are said to satisfy needs as they arise exactly through their lack of central regulation and planning. NGOs were portrayed as becoming increasingly

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<sup>8</sup> For a critique on these "NGO articles of faith" see Terje Tvedt (1998:128) and Sheelagh Stewart (1997).

<sup>9</sup> The literature assumes rather than proves NGOs' goal orientation and sees donor pressures towards professionalisation as the most important threat to it, because it endangers NGOs' capacity to identify their objectives independently by working directly with communities (Mitlin 1998).

institutionalised from ad hoc service provision to established structures and systems of capacity building in a teleological evolution of organisational learning and increasing efficiency (Ebrahim 2003; Fowler 1991).

Whereas this literature has evaluated in how far NGOs fit this ideal type of efficient and flexible organisation, recent accounts paid more attention to how exactly NGOs create efficiency. These accounts conceded that NGOs constituted a distinct type of organisation and that rules of management applied differently to NGOs than to private sector companies or public institutions. This literature has stressed the important role normative power, symbolic rewards and consensus-building play in NGO management (Lewis 2003; Kocka 2005: 37). More radical critics pointed out that the managerial arguments about the supposed natural efficiency of NGOs do not capture organisations work at all. They argued that empirical data did not sustain the assumption that NGOs follow a linear learning curve towards greater efficiency and that any regressions are merely lapses in an otherwise straightforward progress towards a given goal. As Wiebe Nauta (2006) argues, in NGO work there is as much unlearned as there is learned and NGO development never evolves straight towards a given goal.<sup>10</sup> NGO work thus includes at least as much repetition as innovation.

### **Does civil society empower grassroots communities and advance the accountability of the powerful?**

Debates about civil society's social empowerment role are often based on (tacit) assumptions about their close connections to recipient communities. (Clark 1995; Fowler 1988). These accounts argue that the increase of international funding had led NGOs away from their original ties with grassroots communities. NGOs' greatest challenge was to ensure that the organisation would not loose this connection by becoming too involved in donor-led contracting work, which narrowed their room for manoeuvre and let them shift resources away from trying to obtain long-term objectives (Lewis 2003). Authors have cautioned that NGOs had become too close for comfort to donors and thus compromised on their own independence

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<sup>10</sup> This observation has also been confirmed by data from Namibian NGOs. A comparison of meeting protocols over the years in Namibian NGOs also shows that NGOs frequently discussed the same topics over and over again and repeated particular initiatives over the course of several years.

(Edwards/Hulme 1997; Mitlin 1998). Jim Igoe (2003) provides a case study of this changing focus of NGO work. He shows how the rapid influx of donor money into pastoralist NGOs led to a widening gap between the organisations and the people they claimed to benefit, and thus illustrates how NGOs always reflect the context in which they work. The ever growing detachment of pastoralist NGOs from communities led to discontent with the increasingly distant organisations that did no longer understand the dominant concerns in communities and whose new focus on impact litigation held few benefits for their original constituencies.

However, other case studies of African NGOs seem to suggest that NGOs never had any close connections to grassroots to begin with and had always defined accountability and responsiveness exclusively in regard to donors. Wiebe Nauta (2003: 262/3) has shown how an urban land rights NGO in South Africa represented rural communities as passive receivers of its projects which were often planned with only minimal involvement of recipients. The few times consultations with recipient communities took place the NGO had only met the rural elite who could speak English and understood the process of land claims which meant that they could be easily integrated into the NGO's centrally planned workshops. Erica Bornstein (2006) has shown how NGOs systematically misrepresent their projects to keep the correct reporting form, at the expense of honest feedback, to improve project implementation. These empirical accounts therefore demonstrate that organisations do not necessarily define their accountability as responsiveness towards recipients, but often regard it to be answerability to donors.

Similarly, Namibian NGOs defined accountability as correct reporting to, and regular audits for, donors. In contrast they represented their relation to recipients above all as welfare intervention whereby the NGO gave out charity to undemanding beneficiaries. The literature on recipients in international development tried to move away from representing communities as passive "beneficiaries". The dominant trend now represents recipients as "partners" (Maxwell/Ridell 1998) and advocates to place recipients' human rights at the centre of development. This new "human rights based approach" in international development has claimed to embody the transition from the logic of philanthropy to a model that recognises the agency of recipients. Proponents argue that this new approach empowers recipients to claim development as part of their human rights instead of being dependent on the generosity of donors who might



grant or withhold charity at their own will (Filmer-Wilson 2005; Gready/Ensor 2005; Win 2007). Critics fear, however, that a human rights based approach is culturally imperialistic, lacks the potential for practical application and provides only a vague empowerment (Katsui 2008). Also, a human rights based approach still regards the overall goals of development as given, and concedes agency to recipients only as long as their demands are identical with these predefined goals (Höhn 2006).

Debates around civil society's multiple roles in development bring up questions which will constitute the analytical focus of the thesis. First, they point to debates about the definition of NGO agency and in how far their work is determined by external demands, i.e. by the government's agenda, by donor requests or by recipients' requirements. The second question concerns the relation between external expectations and internal dynamics in NGOs, and the impact normative assumptions about civil society's contribution to development had on the organisations' internal practices. Lastly it can be asked what consequences these insights have for our understanding of NGOs' role in (African) development.

### *Methodological implications*

A focus on a "real existing civil society" and closer attention to what NGOs actually do and how they do it suggests looking at NGOs' dominant practices. A practice is here understood to mean much more than a particular action and includes the underlying rules and interactions that make it a human activity.<sup>11</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre (1992: 187) has defined practice as

Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence and human conceptions of the ends and good involved are systematically extended.

Discrete acts are not a practice, but the entire dynamic system is. MacIntyre says that kicking a ball with skill is not a practice, the game of football is; planting

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<sup>11</sup> See Hannah Arendt 1958 and chapter 7.

turnips is not a practice, farming is. In this sense writing a report is not practice, documenting is (see chapter 3); completing a funding application is not a practice, fundraising is (chapter 6). Practices are thus complex and interactional, rule-based, set to develop over time and provide actors with incentives to do well (MacIntyre 1992:188). This view on practices therefore differs from the arguments that see NGO practices as means to achieve external goals, be it “development”, the extension of the state (Ferguson 1990; Jennings 2008) or the remodelling of societies (Jennings 2001).

Practices are good to think with. David Mosse and David Lewis have argued that the “ethnographic complexity of practice” (2006:15) can help to understand how development workers draw diverse things and actors together in order to create coherence. In a similar way Namibian NGOs juggled their relations to donors, peers, government agencies and recipients in their daily work. This suggests investigating how NGO staff manage the sector’s embeddedness in multiple networks and how they reconcile tensions between normative ideas and their everyday work. It brings into focus NGO agency and the ways in which they actively construct their social, political and economic roles rather than simply implementing predefined models (Lewis/Mosse 2006:11).

Practices develop their internal dynamics and lead to new outcomes because they result from people’s improvisation and their ability to play the game of social interaction (Calhoun et al 1993:4). Although practices are rules-based, people constantly redefine these rules in an infinite variety of social situations (Taylor 1993: 58). In Namibian civil society, workshops, committee meetings and consultations often evolved in unforeseen ways, and led to surprising outcomes. NANGOF convened a series of meetings for civil society organisations, which were all planned in the same way. However, these meetings turned out to be very different in their content, structure and outcome as the interactions of the participants “eroded” NANGOF’s carefully planned blueprint. In the end, the purpose, outcome and follow-ups of each session was different from the rest and they were hardly recognisable as a series of identically planned meetings. At a national conference a very eloquent NGO director expanded his contribution to the general debate so that it turned out to be a twenty minute presentation about his strong views on the topic. This presentation consequently informed much of the remaining discussion for the day and shaped the

conference's final resolution. Although it is impossible to know for sure how things would have gone if the director had not taken to the floor, it is very likely that people would have expressed more diverse opinions. The experience of the conference shows that interactive practices assume their own dynamics and often shape outcomes in ways that could not be anticipated beforehand. Very often, particular activities gave rise to the same sort of actions, committees led to more committees, conferences generated conferences and workshops required follow up workshops. During my time at NANGOF there was not one meeting without a follow up. Even meetings that were planned as singular events entailed at least a steering committee or working group session.<sup>12</sup>

Practices are thus tools to trace how 'doing civil society' defines the sector, its boundaries and its unarticulated connotations. As Paul Lichterman (1998: 403) argued, participant observation is the best method to examine meanings that activists take for granted in their everyday work. I 'did' civil society from October 2007 until July 2008, working part-time for NANGOF, the Namibian NGO Forum. NANGOF is the organisation in Namibia that has most explicitly assumed a coordinating function for a wide variety of non-governmental organisations. David Mosse (2005:15) argued that organizations are best understood from within, and that it is impossible to sustain long term participant observation without any practical contribution. In this sense my involvement with NANGOF included active contribution to the umbrella's work and at the same time it was my most important source of information about the sector because "how things happen is why they happen" (Tilly 2006:410).<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of the focus on practices is not to evaluate how "true" stories told by and about NGOs are, but to ask more relevant questions about the meaning and work of civil society. The chapters that follow do not ask whether civil society works, i.e. how good it is (Edwards/Hulme 1992) or how well it achieves its goals (Alexander 1998; Bebbington et al 2007). Instead they seek to illustrate how it works by investigating what NGO employees were doing and how this relates to the

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12 This argument is made in more detail in chapter 4.

13 A number of authors have pointed out how new the ethnographic approach to politics is (Baiochi/Connor 2008; Auyero 2006; Tilly 2006) and have contrasted participant observation's interest in practices and microscopic perspective with mainstream methods in political research like causal model building and statistics. Area studies, however, have a long tradition of ethnographic research and it thus seems unnecessary to repeat their arguments about the benefits of ethnography.

normative claims that have been made about the organisations.<sup>14</sup> Whereas the literature has often painted a picture of NGOs as the linchpin of innovative development or emergency assistance, civil society organisations in Namibia were predominantly occupied with day-to-day administration. They hardly discussed substantial questions and even the occasional strategic planning meetings were designed to improve project implementation rather than to discuss overall objectives. When I asked where the organisations' goals came from and why they were worthwhile to pursue there was often an uneasy silence, because respondents were not sure whether I was just (foreign and) extremely ignorant or really so foolish not to know.<sup>15</sup> In informal conversations staff said they knew about Namibia's development needs, because they lived in the country and they knew about the purpose of their organisation because they had been working for it for a long time. NGO staff were certain that their "doing civil society" was sufficient to understand the development imperatives in Namibia. Claims to knowledge about civil society's mandate were always based on experiences rather than on consultations with recipients who hardly figured as reliable source of information.

### *The history of civil society organisations in Namibia*<sup>16</sup>

Civic organisations were confronted with considerable difficulties during apartheid. The few organizations that were founded in the 1980s were neither accepted by the colonial regime nor fully endorsed by the liberation movement. The state had strict laws in place to curb freedom of movement and association and ensured that it was the only provider of education and social services as means to

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14 Kimberley Coles (2007:10) makes a similar argument when she states that the interesting question about democracy is not whether it works but how it works.

15 The surprised reactions my enquiries about the goals show how difficult it was for people working in civil society to ask fundamental questions. At least at the start of my research I was regarded as outsider who would normally ask funny questions, but for somebody working in an NGO those questions would show real ignorance and challenge the person's ability to work in the sector.

16 Strictly speaking there is no legal entity called "NGO" in Namibia. The law distinguishes between section 21 companies (i.e. companies not for gain), Trusts, Welfare organisations and voluntary organisations. Only the last type of organisation is membership based and none of the organisations with regular contacts to NANGOF was a voluntary organisation. I decided to keep the generic term NGO because the difference in legal status did not result in different organisations. Most Section 21 Companies and Welfare organisations had a Board of Trustees which was often part of the organisations' funding obligations. Also, most people I spoke to referred to their organisation as NGO.

regulate native affairs and maintain minority rule. For the liberation movement SWAPO the political struggle was priority and it regarded civic associations geared towards bringing “development” with suspicion (Bauer 1998: 79; Geisler 2004: 145/6). Additionally, SWAPO claimed to be the sole representative of the Namibian people and thought of any social association outside its rank and file as potential competition. The top leadership continuously stifled initiatives of younger members and did not encourage civic activism within Namibia. During apartheid, South West Africa’s economy was based on extractive mining and contract labour. The state, fearing any form of organized resistance coming from large mining compounds descended heavily on the nascent trade unions inside Namibia (Bauer 1998; Katjavivi 1988a 1988b). Workers had to resort to other passive forms of resistance like “go slow” (Ndadi 1988), because they were cut off from the SWAPO-affiliated trade union in exile and the liberation movement hardly supported organized workers’ resistance within Namibia.<sup>17</sup>

Education was the oldest battlegrounds in the apartheid state, and organized resistance to the racialised education system preceded any other political association in South West Africa. The first South West African student body was founded in exile in 1952 and later became the “South West Africa National Union”. SWANU was the first political resistance movement in Namibia, long before SWAPO’s predecessor, the Ovambo Peoples organization (OPO) was founded in 1959. Civic activism on education had always attempted to represent all Namibian students irrespective of standards of and access to education due to skin colour, location and school type. Attempts to represent all students resulted in non-affiliation with SWAPO and financial difficulties which were only resolved with SWAPO’s official acknowledgement of the Namibian National Students’ Organisation (NANSO) in 1988 (Maseko 1995).<sup>18</sup>

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17 When the unionist Ben Ulenga reported a workers strike at Rossing mine to SWAPO he was told that it was not up to the workers in Namibia to decide when to strike and they should have waited until SWAPO instructed them to do so (Bauer 1998)

18 After independence the relations between student organizations and SWAPO remained difficult. Bauer reports that when the Namibian National Student Organisation (NANSO) voted in 1991 to disassociate itself from SWAPO, the party’s leadership called the initiators of the move ‘foreign agents’. After a split, a reconstituted ‘NANSO-affiliated’ voted to break away from SWAPO again in 1997, after the organization’s president had been expelled from the party. SWAPO managed to retain the national Trade Union as its ally, but remaining criticism within the Union is still met with threats.

Women were particularly affected by apartheid policies, the general conscription in the south, and contract labour in the north meant that they lost sons and husbands and were often left to provide for large households on their own. However, SWAPO's Women's Council did not address these issues echoing the liberation movement's credo that the political struggle had to be won before relief assistance could be provided. In response a group of the Women's Council members formed an independent organization, the Namibian Women's Voice (NWV) to help women in providing for their families. Before long however, the NWV's leadership was asked by SWAPO to dissolve, as their organization was seen as distracting women from the real struggle, i.e. SWAPO's liberation war (Bauer 1998: 80; Leys/Saul 1995).

Lastly, the independent churches had a long history of association with SWAPO and people from SWAPO's rank and file often held high offices on church boards (Katjavivi 1988a:31). The Council of Churches (CCN) was formed in 1978 as umbrella for all independent churches and has been actively involved in the struggle alongside SWAPO (Haikali 1988). It first echoed SWAPO's refusal to take on development issues. When SWAPO allowed development work in the 1980s the SWAPO-controlled CCN became the only approved channel for external aid. As Christo Lombardt (2001) argues the close association between the CCN and SWAPO long after independence compromised the churches' independent position after 1990, and was especially problematic when they refused to support the families of those who were detained and killed by SWAPO during the liberation struggle. During the 1980s the apartheid state relaxed some of its most controversial regulations as a result of international pressure, and as a consequence of the ongoing war with SWAPO in the north (Leys/Saul 1995). Grassroots activism expanded considerably in this decade. Colin Leys and John Saul list 29 NGOs in Namibia for 1986 and 54 for 1989 (Leys/Saul 1995).

Namibia's independence in 1990 coincided with a funding boom for NGOs in international aid. The opening of the political space together with available funds led to the formation of many new NGOs which sought primarily to play more active roles in community development. Many focused on service delivery to specific target groups, such as the disabled, women, youth, communal farmers, small-scale

entrepreneurs, and later, people with HIV/AIDS. However, at the start of the new millennium international funding for NGOs declined and Namibian NGOs felt the cut. As chapter 6 demonstrates declining funds led NGOs concentrate on what proved to be successful with donors and contributed to an increasingly sharp contrast between strong and weak NGOs.

Different criteria have been used to distinguish between strong and weak organisations. The arguably obvious measure of organisational strength was monetary resources, based on assumptions that budget size and staff numbers translated neatly into different NGO capacities. Indeed, a recent survey of civil society organisations in Namibia showed that there were considerable differences between organisations regarding their funding and staff numbers. The survey distinguishes between NGOs and Community-based organisations (CBOs) depending on the degree of their institutionalisation.<sup>19</sup> While 27 NGOs employ nearly 1,300 staff and have access to over 4,000 volunteers, CBOs only employ around 7% of the full time staff and 31% of the part time staff within civil society. Budget figures were much more difficult to obtain, because organisations were particularly secretive about their income. Differences in employment structure could also be read as indicating differentiated spending power with NGOs being in a much better position to pay full time staff salaries than CBOs (NANGOF August 2009). This survey also shows that 73% of civil society support comes from bilateral donors with strict funding requirements. This means that only civil society organisations with an already strong fundraising capacity could attract more funding. Budget size was not the most important criterion for NGOs themselves to distinguish between strong and weak organisations. Instead, they used administrative processes as measuring sticks. A strong organisation had an established monitoring and evaluation mechanism, regular audits, an extensive reporting system and strictly adhered to its code of conduct (NANGOF June 2009:19). This definition did not include the involvement of recipients as criterion for organisational strength <sup>20</sup> and focused on accountability, evaluation and transparency in NGOs' relations to donors, peers and the Namibian government.

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19 NGOs had a written constitution, a governance structure which distinguishes between the Board and its secretariat; NGOs had regular audits and a bank account, all of which set them apart from a CBO.

20 The survey states that international funding increasingly seeks to define projects before grants are released. This means that organisations need to have to draw up a complete project plan on short

However, this thesis shows that the most important criterion dividing strong and weak organisations was not procedure, but the position of an organisation. Strong organisations differed from weak ones above all in their strategic integration in civil society wide networks, their proximity to ministries and their established cooperation with international donors. An organisation's overall position in Namibia's development circle, and NGO staff's personal networks to donor representatives and government officials were more difficult to quantify but were highly important for an organisation's influence.<sup>21</sup> Often organisations with strong strategic positions were those which had employed well known people with extensive personal networks for a long time, enjoyed a high reputation amongst policy makers and donors,<sup>22</sup> were urban and well represented in the media.<sup>23</sup> The strategic position could explain why the LAC's women's project with few staff could be far more influential than many larger women's organisations. Good networks also provided a few organisations with a disproportionately loud voice in sector wide decisions. These decisions were often taken by the organisations that were closely involved with NANGOF. The umbrella maintains active contact with 30 organisations (European Commission 2002: 4). Considering that its database lists over a thousand civil society organisations the number is considerably low. When the Namibian government took steps to regulate civil society through a "partnership policy" most well positioned organisations strongly opposed the policy. However a later survey found that 45% of civil society organisations outside the capital preferred a government regulation to a self regulatory code. The most visible and best connected organisations were therefore not necessarily representative of the majority of civil society groups. This suggests that any analysis of civil society needs to take the differences between organisations into account. A more explicit focus on the relations between member organisations of a national umbrella body will investigate the differences between organisations more analytically, and make a more explicit case to disaggregate the NGO sector. It will thus address the gap between normative claims and empirical work about NGOs in

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notice, a process that 'can sit uncomfortably with "maximum citizen participation" as one NANGOF report stated (NANGOF June 2009: 18).

21 A PhD colleague told me that the situation was similar with Indian NGOs where, judging from her work experience, some organisations were funded mostly because they had extensive personal networks rather than good projects. Shishrui Pradhan, personal communication 15 April 2010.

22 See chapters 2 and 6

23 See chapter 7.



the literature. As David Lewis and Paul Opuka-Mensah argued, the NGO literature has not kept pace with the increasing complexity and internal diversity of the NGO landscape (2006:670). One of its greatest challenges is therefore to combine the empirical detail of case studies with theoretical insights about NGOs without repeating the normative statements about the intrinsic value of NGOs.

Recently there have been more direct efforts to solicit input from those organisations beyond the small circle of strong NGOs. A “civil society baseline” survey and a biannual civil society salary survey were designed to keep track of the changing employment structure in the sector with a particular focus on the comparison between rural and urban organisations. Both surveys were commissioned by the organisation that was initially set up to address exactly the lack of communication in and information about civil society. Already in 1990, discussions had started to identify the possibility of more institutionalised NGO cooperation, and a series of consultations took place. NGOs decided to institutionalise networking in a forum with its own constitution and steering committee and created the “Namibian NGO Forum” (NANGOF) in April 1991. At that time there were different ideas about what NANGOF should be doing in the sector. A commissioned study came up with a large number of recommendations. A year later the General Assembly meeting agreed that NANGOF should focus on practical issues around which to develop cooperation. The following years showed that NANGOF needed its own infrastructure because member organisations could not cope with the additional workload for NANGOF, and NANGOF’s executives were already overcommitted and hardly took on civil society wide tasks. Things continued in this ad hoc fashion until the end of 1994. In January 1995 NANGOF was established in its own offices, with agreement to set about recruiting a small team of staff guaranteed by its member base.<sup>24</sup>

However, increasing pressure in the context of decline in funding for the non-governmental sector led NANGOF to apply for its own projects towards the end of the 1990s. This caused serious critique from member organisations that feared that the umbrella competed with them for grants. Discontent grew when NANGOF concentrated so much on its own projects that it neglected its coordinating role in civil

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24 NANGOF 1998

society, and members lost trust in the umbrella and left. NANGOF's final breakdown came in 2005 when the Namibian Ministry of Finance claimed that the umbrella had not paid (salary) taxes for a decade and billed the organisation for several million Namibian dollars at a time when NANGOF's funding was running dry. The only solution was to close down NANGOF completely, request the ministry to write off the debt and set up a new legal entity, called the NANGOF Trust the following year. As the renewed institutionalisation of NGO coordination, NANGOF was the obvious place to observe how civil society was enacted.<sup>25</sup>

### **Fieldwork: Doing civil society in Namibia**

Between August 2007 and July 2008 I spent twelve months as volunteer at NANGOF. My work there was split between helping with administrative tasks around the office and researching local funding opportunities for civil society on behalf of the umbrella. As my time at NANGOF drew towards a close and more and more administrative tasks were taken over by the newly employed full-time staff, I increasingly resumed my role as research student and interviewed directors of other NGOs, donor representatives and government officials as researcher detached from NANGOF.

My time at NANGOF<sup>26</sup> thus coincided exactly with the new start and the formation of the new NANGOF office. I participated in its re-launch and gained practical experiences of an NGO's life cycle in a nutshell. When I first joined NANGOF there were only one part time secretary and a (voluntary) acting director trying to manage the very basic day-to-day tasks of the umbrella. By the time I left, NANGOF employed five full time members of staff through a generous grant from the EC, it had secured new funding from the Ford Foundation, and had already organised about a dozen events for its members. Civic organisations had started to join NANGOF again and were prepared to invest time, work and commitment in the

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25 Besides NANGOF there are a number of issue-specific umbrellas like the Namibian Network of AIDS Service Organisations (NANASO), an umbrella for organisations working on HIV/AIDS, NACSO, the Namibian Association for Community based natural resource management organisations and the Namibia Nature Foundation, both coordinating environmental organisations. All these specific umbrellas were members of NANGOF.

26 Unless explicitly stated I will use NANGOF as shorthand for The NANGOF Trust.

umbrella. The number of membership applications also increased considerably over the second quarter of 2008, my last few months there.

My work at NANGOF mirrored the changes in the umbrella's institutional capacity. At the start the small NANGOF volunteer team<sup>27</sup> could only administer the daily office functions, especially after NANGOF ran out of money in October 2007 and the secretary had to leave the office. We published regular e-newsletter, answered enquiries from members and ministries and kept NANGOF's records updated. After the new Executive Director took office in January 2008 I assisted in expanding NANGOF's set up and scope. I sat on interview panels to select the new employees and participated in the selection of the consultants to write a training manual and the next business plan for NANGOF. Towards the end of my time all members of staff had taken office and my duties changed yet again. Now I assisted the permanent staff in organising and conducting workshops, coordination meetings and national conferences. My work profile mirrored the evolution of NANGOF during this year from the administration of everyday office work at the beginning, towards the building of organisational capacity and finally to the division of labour within a fully functional organisation.

Besides my administrative work for NANGOF I pursued a couple of smaller "projects" for the umbrella. Over the year I conducted about thirty interviews with local donor representatives about their civil society funding programmes in Namibia. I spoke mostly to representatives at German foundations and small grants administrators at embassies and international organisations about their funding priorities and feedback requirements. The aim of the interviews was to set up a "funding database" for civil society organisations in Namibia that NANGOF wanted to provide as special service to its members. The interviews gave me the opportunity to find out more about particular donor perspectives on civil society in the country. The preparation of the survey and the data processing let me appreciate the difficulties umbrellas faced in deciding how to store and distribute data to make it most accessible and useful for a wide variation of civil society organisations.<sup>28</sup>

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27 Besides the acting director and me there were two more volunteers from Voluntary Services Overseas.

28 Difficult decisions concerned whether to store the data electronically or publishing a booklet. Electronic data was only available to those few organisations with computers and internet access, but

I also wrote a small number of occasional papers for NANGOF on different topics like funding for civil society, or civil society's role in poverty reduction in Namibia. In writing those papers I had to adopt a particular "civil society perspective" and needed to employ strategies used in writing for civil society. I had to break down complex relations to simple categories and causal links, and had to back up all my claims with quantitative data. I learnt what civil society's need to produce "accountable" reports meant for the thinking and writing process and started appreciating the difficulties that come with presenting intangible concepts like "awareness raising" and "poverty reduction" as measurable processes.<sup>29</sup>

My work for NANGOF provided me with first hand experience of the particular challenges faced by an umbrella organisation. It taught me above all how difficult it is to coordinate a great variety of social activism and how challenging it can be to meet the needs of diverse organisations. Demands from strong and well funded organisations were typically very different from those of smaller, more remote and less resourceful ones. Smaller organisations wanted the umbrella to help them in finding funding and improving their relations with donors. Stronger organisations in contrast asked the umbrella to solicit opinions and coordinate responses to civil society wide issues like governmental policies. The umbrella very often favoured the stronger organisations' demands for coordination at the expense of smaller organisations' requests. The consultations very often represented the challenge to marry a quick response to pressing issues with the need for wide consultations. Members often expected the umbrella to do both simultaneously and they frequently criticised NANGOF for neglecting one aspect or the other.

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booklets were a slow form of distribution, making the information almost useless as donors had changed their funding regimes by the time the booklets reached their destinations. Difficulties also arose from donor preferences for particular topics and how strictly donors adhered to their own choices. Some donors would only fund very specific activities others were more lenient as long as the project seemed to be durable, but the categorisation of topics did not allow for these variations. See also chapter 6.

<sup>29</sup> See the description of NGO reporting in chapter 3.

Through my work for NANGOF I learned how new organisations were established and I gained insights into the specific tasks of an umbrella, but I also got to know the work and everyday challenges most civil society organisations face. Work at NANGOF included long and detailed procedures of compiling funding applications and the juggling of opposing demands for services and benefits.<sup>30</sup> Personal relations at NANGOF were not always smooth and tensions arose every so often between the full-time staff at the secretariat and the NANGOF's Board of Trustees, the elected and voluntary governance structure of the organisation. Mirroring the experience of many other civil society organisations, NANGOF's relations with the Namibian government varied considerably, oscillating between close collaboration and open opposition as chapter 5 will show in greater detail. Very often I experienced these relations from a NANGOF staff perspective, but at times I stepped outside the institutional attachment and talked to Trustees and government officials about these relations as a research student.

The combination of insider and outsider information runs through most of the data in the thesis. I had access to "insider" data by working for NANGOF, gathering information in various staff meetings, NANGOF workshops and conferences and through the many informal conversations during tea breaks and around the office. Since civil society work consists of discrete acts, data on what people do on a daily basis and the meaning they give to their actions constitute the foundations for the analysis. I complemented this insider information with outsider information - data I gathered as research student detached from NANGOF. I interviewed donor representatives, government officials and people working in other NGOs towards the end of my stay. I left these long semi-structured and unstructured interviews until the end, in order to ask more informed questions about different aspects of civil society activism and was able to benefit from a stock of common experiences, acquaintances and knowledge. The interviews revealed the emphasis individuals placed on particular aspects of their work and helped me to appreciate the interactions between the institutional imperatives in civil society, and the agents who are involved in them and remodel them through their behaviour. The data presented here is a combination of

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30 One example concerned the funding database NANGOF had commissioned. It was long debated what data should be made public and which information was for the benefit of members only. Many member organisations felt that this information should only be provided to members, but some regarded the information as public and urged NANGOF not to hold it back.

these sources. The analysis draws on the advantages of both methods, the condensed talk about meanings with individuals in interviews, and the informality of everyday interactions that were less “censored”.

The double role as insider and outsider<sup>31</sup> had definite advantages for the data but it also had its drawbacks. At times I found it particularly difficult to separate the two positions. Especially towards the end it was hard to think of myself as outsider because discussions and interviews were based on shared experiences and knowledge of civil society. Lynne Hume and Jane Mulcock (2004) made the point that it is exactly this chosen imbalance between inside and outside that is productive for ethnographic research, but this did not ease the tension between sympathy and critical distance I felt simultaneously.

Rather than dismiss these tensions I decided to stress the multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations of the data in different chapters, and see them as enriching my understanding of civil society. David Moss (2005:13) has explained that his position between inside and outside development projects enabled him to offer critical insights to his colleagues, but at times also gave him the reputation of being the disruptive and unintelligible academic. My experience at NANGOF was quite similar, especially as I worked in a situation where a large number of foreign, white, mostly young and female professionals would spend some time at an NGO to gain some work experience in a relatively secure African state. This context had a strong influence on how NGO staff saw me, especially when we met for the first time. With more and more shared experiences and acquaintances this view slightly changed and it became possible to talk at length about common concerns. Over time the boundary between my activist colleagues and me therefore faded, but it never really vanished completely.

Working for an NGO also meant that I myself experienced the fundamental contradictions between NGOs’ aspirations and their organisational reality. Being more often than not occupied for days with minute writing and report editing I often

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31 In my experience the two locations were not a neat binary but the two ends of a continuum. Depending on context and issue I was more or less of an insider or outsider, but very rarely completely integrated or totally excluded from civil society.

thought about NANGOF's promise to be the linchpin of civic activism and as such to offer services to all Namibian NGOs - a promise that was arguably impossible to keep for remote organisations because Namibia has one of the lowest population densities in Africa. The tension between promises and reality was also visible in other areas. I participated in the polite but nevertheless serious fights for turf between NANGOF and other umbrellas in the context of limited funds for coordinating organisations. I was keen to emphasise to donors that NANGOF and its members were fundamentally different from private corporations whose main concern was the selfish accumulation of money, but I also spent entire days with grant applications and in discussions about how to "sell" NANGOF better to donors. I maintained contact to research based NGOs who stressed that they were not the "placard weaving" type of organisation, but who would often participate in all of NANGOF's meetings about how best to oppose government's attempts to regulate civil society. At NANGOF we were keen to set ourselves apart from donors and government agencies, but often discussed the possibility of NANGOF administering a Trust Fund for smaller organisations and to use the umbrella's code of conduct as alternative scheme to the government's NGO bill. We planned to model it on the experience of several environmental NGOs who had set up trust funds to distribute smaller grants to community based organisations throughout the country. The NGOs act as grant makers but also continue to implement their own projects, therefore blurring the distinction between donor and NGO. Chapter 5 will show how many NGOs have played important roles in policy formulation and implementation and thus have challenged the governmental-NGO boundary. All these examples show that in practice civil society organisations have blurred the theoretically neat distinctions between NGO, donor and government found in the literature, and also entertained by people working in the sector.

My involvement with the umbrella organisation therefore provided me with a good starting point to investigate the fundamental tensions in NGOs' work that are not necessarily articulated in dominant discourses about the sector. However, the focus on NANGOF and the interactions between organisations also had its limitations.

Firstly, this thesis focuses on strong NGOs and leaves out the perspectives of weaker and more remote organisations. This bias is partly the result of the thesis' interest in the intersection between organisations. Remote organisations tended to be

relatively isolated from the networks that I investigated. This in itself represents an interesting insight into the practicalities of NANGOF's outreach, and puts the umbrella's claim to represent all Namibian civic organisations into perspective. I would have been unable to reach any substantial number of remote organisations to explore their relations to the national umbrella in any meaningful way. I am well aware that this repeats exactly the argument that NANGOF made for not being able to maintain closer contact with its rural members. I therefore experienced the structural obstacles to "outreach" work myself. I tried to address this gap by relying on NANGOF's documentation about its members over the years. NANGOF's latest civil society baseline survey suggests that rural organisations do not invest much in their relation to other NGOs and they do not seem to be occupied with defining the exact role of civil society in national development.

The second major group I left out were Namibian government officials. My research interest in the workings of civil society meant that I focused on the civil society side of the relation and explored governmental institutions only in their significance for civil society. Additionally government only recently started a new attempt to formalise its relations to civil society through a special office. Although I interviewed this "help desk officer" I got the impression that I would have needed to work with multiple departments in several ministries to draw together a more adequate picture of the government's perspective on civil society. This shows that just as there is no prototype NGO there is no homogenous entity called 'the government' – instead multiple ministries maintain different relations to individual NGOs and have various restrictions of access for external researchers.

Finally, my methodological choice also implies limitations. As I have already pointed out, most of the data gathered came from participant observation and I only conducted a few interviews during my time at NANGOF, mostly with donor representatives, the government's help desk officer and a few NGO executives. I had started fieldwork with an interview based approach but soon found out that this was extremely frustrating and non productive. NGO personnel, especially in executive functions, were often too busy to sit down with me for a two hour interview about their work. Even if they agreed to be interviewed, the context of talking to an external researcher about civic activism often only produced clichéd tales about the



importance of NGOs rather than generating interesting insights about the sector. This was very understandable as the general funding decline had made NGO leaders extremely wary about the information they provided in interviews with outsiders about their work. I therefore soon felt the need to demonstrate my loyalty to, and my insider knowledge of, NGOs before I could expect people to open up. Although I conducted some lengthy interviews towards the end of my stay, most data derived from participation rather than from interviews. This means that the findings are my own interpretation and were not necessarily explicitly stated by NGO personnel. I tried to compensate for this by providing a detailed description of the context that led me to my conclusions.

### *Chapter overview*

The following chapters explore dominant practices and relations in civil society and by doing so discuss wider analytical questions about NGOs' aspirations, accountability and agency.

Chapter 2 sets the context of 'doing civil society' by investigating how people become activists. It explores how NGO staff distinguishes themselves from employees in other sectors and focuses on the stories they tell about activists. It argues that it is these stories that turn people into activists. People therefore do not become activists after they have received particular training and they are also not turned into activists by specific personal experiences - but activists are talked into being in various conversations between colleagues. Close personal networks between people working in the sector and a long history of shared experiences ensured an unusual level of cohesiveness and sense of belonging within civil society which made stories about colleagues highly influential. The chapter already indicates that recipients only played a marginal role in the NGOs' definition of civil society's work; and recipients' peripheral position in civil society's self definition is a recurring analytical topic that the following chapters illustrate in more depth.

The following two chapters explore specific NGO practices. Chapter 3 looks at documenting civic activism and shows that gathering, storing and administering large

amounts of information had become an end in itself. Through their documents civil society organisations created the terms of their own engagement. They constructed an image of their intervention that was the direct result of their reporting requirements and had very little to do with recipients' needs. The chapter illustrates how administrative imperatives, rather than ideological decisions about the projects' purpose, defined the particular form of NGO engagement and demonstrates that recipients were merely supernumeraries in civil society reporting. Additionally, the chapter points to the centrality of the correct form in NGOs' definition of sound projects. The chapter therefore picks up two overall analytical topics of the thesis, the marginalization of recipients' demands and the sector's prioritisation of protocol over substantial questions.

Chapter 4 investigates how civil society coordination works. NGOs often claimed that the main mechanisms to ensure proper coordination in civil society were sector wide meetings. However, civil society meetings seem to produce only more meetings instead of resulting in increased coordination, which would reduce the need for more meetings. The chapter asks why this was the case. It shows that the sequence of meetings was a self perpetuating system with little external impact. The prime function of this system was to generate reasons for further meetings. Besides the primacy of protocol which has already been visible in civil society's reporting, the chapter also shows a basic tension between NGOs' aspirations to improve coordination and the reality of their work. The promise of improved coordination could not be fulfilled because civil society practices only reflect upon themselves. The chapter explores civil society practices as self - referential system, and the self-referentiality of practices constitutes a third analytical topic in the thesis.

The last three chapters look at civil society's relation to external actors: to the government in chapter 5, to donors in chapter 6 and to the private sector in chapter 7. The *de facto* close cooperation between NGOs and government agencies stood in stark contrast to the sector's claim about its critical distance to the state, and to be thus the prime guarantor of governmental accountability as chapter 5 shows. The idea that the two sectors were completely separate meant that they occasionally remained apart when close cooperation would have been the obvious choice. Relations therefore involved different degrees of contestation and collaboration depending on context, the

NGO's self image and specific opportunities. This suggests that it is misleading to think civil society only fulfilled one particular role vis-à-vis the state. NGOs do not only check government's performance, or extend state power, or mediate between grassroots and the central state, but they are agents in their own right who actively moderate their functions according to context and are reluctant to commit themselves to any exclusionary role. The chapter develops the analytical topics of the basic tension between NGOs' aspirations and work reality shown in chapter 4 and the marginalization of recipients' demands for civil society projects shown in chapters 3 and 4. Additionally, it demonstrates how important it is to analytically disaggregate the sectors "civil society" and "government", in order to examine the multiple and often contradictory relations between organisations; a topic that the following two chapters develop further.

Chapter 6 examines civil society's fundraising and argues that funding had a decisive influence on civil society's work, but mostly through its technicalities. Grant selection criteria, the administration of budgets and the structural consequences of declining resources all had a much more profound effect on NGOs than any particular worldview donors propagated. The chapter disaggregates the NGO sector by illustrating how NGOs' distinct administrative powers resulted in their very different capacities to secure grants. It also shows that donors were not one homogenous sector and varied considerably in their funding regimes and their influence on NGO projects.

The last chapter compares civil society to the private sector. It shows that NGOs resembled private companies in many aspects, but faced a bifurcated "customer" structure which separated their customers into "buyers" (i.e. donors) and receivers of services ("beneficiaries"). The chapter shows that NGOs were much more closely connected to donors and peers, and thus constructed only their demands as dynamic and worth of close monitoring. In contrast they imagined recipients' requests as unchanging and unattainable which allowed them to present recipients as organisational assets to advance their status with donors and amongst peers. The chapter shows that NGOs made a conscious decision to prioritise their relations to donors and peers. Although their actions are shaped by the structural constraints, organisations are agents in their own right rather than mediators between recipient

demands and donor requirements; NGO agency is the last chain of analysis that spans the thesis.

All chapters show that practices in NGOs were always the result of their integration in different networks. Even “internal” issues like staff profiles or project documentation were in fact shaped by the interaction between organisations, because staff frequently met and exchanged experiences and ideas about how to ‘do civil society’. The boundary between internal and external NGO work is therefore blurred, and sector wide ideas about ‘proper’ civic activism were highly influential in the way NGOs were run. The conclusion draws out some of the overall themes in the chapters and asks what can be learnt from the Namibian case study for the understanding of civil society in Africa more generally. It shows that some aspects might be highly specific to a strong state like Namibia, such as the NGOs’ increased competition for funding from state agencies or their views on government as partner rather than as threat; other insights might be applicable to civil society organisations elsewhere, for example the important role of administrative concerns, the argument to see NGOs as autonomous agents instead of just as mediators, and the basic tension between civil society’s aspiration and the reality of everyday activism.

## **Chapter 2 “I used to be an activist but now I’m doing something else”**

This quote came from the government’s civil society helpdesk officer, a person employed to strengthen links between the state and the NGO sector. He had been working for a development NGO in the 1990s and his helpdesk work still kept him in close contact with civil society. However, he did not consider himself to be an activist anymore. This suggests that being an activist in Namibia was not a choice of life, but that people turned into and ceased to be activists over the course of their careers. Being an activist was a role people could slip into and out of depending on their work. The chapter explores exactly how people turn into activists in Namibia. It starts by looking at conventional ways to explain how activists are “created” and reviews the existing literature that mostly focused on activists’ biographies. These accounts presented biographies as stories that created a sense of coherence and explained a person’s career choices and self image as activist. This chapter contrasts this approach with an understanding of activism as inherently social action and examines the specific context that produces activists.

This chapter shows that people in civil society saw commitment, expertise and perseverance as essential characteristics of any true activist. These characteristics could only be learnt to a limited extent through formal training, but it was these qualities that distinguished true activists from mere NGO employees. This meant that people in civil society only appreciated formal training, if the training suited their predominant image about real activists. NGO staff constantly (re)defined this image in repeated stories they told about their colleagues. Stories with their wide variety and different levels of detail are therefore the most important method to understand what people working in Namibian civil society defined as true activists.

Storytelling fulfilled several functions in Namibian civil society. It provided a platform for people to hone the exact meaning of “activist”. Stories also provided people with the opportunity to remodel past experiences and gain a greater sense of control over disempowering incidents when they retold stories of uncivil behaviour and unfair treatments that often contradicted their ideal version of civic activism. Finally the considerable amount of gossip and anecdotes amongst colleagues created a

shared moral interpretation of behaviour and helped to enforce particular ideas what civic activism ought to be about.

The chapter's conclusion asks what this concept of "activist" means for the understanding of civil society as set of technical practices. It points out that activists do not make civil society, but civil society makes activists through multiple anecdotes rather than through formal training. The chapter thus demonstrates that attention to everyday practices in civil society results in a better understanding of the sector than attention to any grand claim about what it means to do good.

### *(Life-)Stories of activists: from roots to routes*

The literature on new social movements has tried to determine what turns individuals into social activists and did so mostly through looking at individual biographies. The focus on life histories assumed that there must be an decisive factor common to most activists that explained the difference between a vague sympathy with the cause and people's active participation in a movement. For example James Jaspers (1997: 101) tried to understand people's willingness to protest through individual biographies. This search for the root cause of social activism seems to assume that activism is a deviant condition that needs to be explained because normal people would not have made this choice (Jaspers 1998; Searle-Chatterjee 1999; Geiger 1987).<sup>32</sup> Brian Roberts (2002) has argued that biographical research has the moral advantage of shifting the focus of analysis from the researcher's interpretation to informants' experiences. However, the method is still based on the researcher's idea that biography is important in the first place. As Thomas Yarrow (2009: 336) pointed out it is a mistake to assume that people everywhere regard biographies as revealing as many in the West would think. In her "The Real World of NGOs" Dorothea Hilhorst (2003) also tries to understand NGO leaders through individual biographies. She retells the story of Amanda, an NGO executive in the Philippines, as a linear tale of increasing involvement in civil activism. Hilhorst explains Amanda's

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32 James Jaspers made the connection between deviancy and protestors himself, although with a more positive connotation. Citing Karl Deutsch he states that social activists' unorthodoxy was extremely important, because solutions for pressing political problems are often found by deviant members of community (1997:341).

civic activism with reference to her Christian values, her childhood experiences of discrimination and her higher education (ibid:174-181). However, Hilhorst only quotes Amanda directly when she speaks about her actual work and there is no indication whether she would agree with Hilhorst's explanation. Similarly the idea that the reasons for people's civic engagement can be found in their individual biography was never expressed by people in Namibian NGOs. Apart from their unproven relevance for Namibian NGO staff, biographies also tend to overemphasise individual decisions and to portray activists' lives in isolation. However, as Michael Jackson (2002) showed, individual life-stories are never detached from a person's social relations and Hannah Arendt argued that stories result from the combination of action and speech and are thus fundamentally social (1958: 184).

One way of bringing social relations back into the analysis of activists is through changing the focus from roots, the importance of individual biographies, to routes - a closer attention to the paths individuals travel and cross throughout their life/career stories. Nicolas Guilhot's study of global democracy promotion (2005) and Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth's account of the internationalisation of human rights law (2002) both show that civic activism is always the outcome of interactions rather than the result of individual biographies. Guilhot argues that US institutions in various sectors work very much alike and promote very similar values. The institutional division into several sectors does therefore not mean that the organisations pursue different agendas. To prove his point he describes how people continue to pursue the same ideas and work on the same policy agenda, although they frequently hop sectors and seemingly change their careers. Guilhot compares these frequent sector changes with a revolving door between government institutions, NGOs and philanthropic foundations through which individuals constantly pass and thus create close links between the organisations. These individuals are often multiple agents who do not exclusively represent an NGO, an international financial institution or the government, but might stand for all depending on context (Guilhot 2005: 12). These frequent changes and multiple roles of individuals create the long term links between sectors that are so decisive for policy planning in all sectors, but that cannot be captured by a structural analysis alone (Gordenker/Weiss 1997:446). Dezalay and Garth developed a similar method, what they called "relational biography" (2003: 11). They studied how similar biographies of human rights activists in the US and South

American countries created “structural homologies” (ibid:14). Those similarities made it possible to export the US human rights regime and have influenced the way in which human rights law has been exported and received. Dezalay and Garth use biographies to understand the context of agency and the range of possible actions available to actors, instead of assuming that values were the same for everyone. Both have thus combined biographies and the analysis of systematic links, in order to appreciate the context in which individuals create values.

This chapter shares the basic argument that the meaning of activism is created in the interaction between people rather than the outcome of isolated careers. However, in contrast to Dezalay and Garth’s case study, interactions in Namibian civil society took place between a particularly mixed group of NGO staff. Unlike the activists in Dezalay/Garth and Guilhot, the NGO directors in Namibia had very different backgrounds and did not change sectors as frequently as Guilhot describes. NGO executives had trained as lawyers, social workers, bank clerks or business managers. They had grown up on rural farms, in urban middle class families, in households at the centre of political resistance in South West Africa or in exile. Activists had graduated from Namibian school, from universities in South Africa or overseas. Despite their vastly different backgrounds activists turned out to be remarkably similar in how they perceived their work and the overall purpose of civil society in Namibia. The context relevant for understanding activists in Namibia is therefore not the structural homologies in activist’s biographies/life stories (Dezalay/Garth 2003), but the arena that civil society itself provided for activists.

Analysing what activists regarded as essential characteristics of activists reveals that they did not turn to individual biographies, their roots, but to the links between people in civil society, their routes, in defining activists. Most people had very mundane reasons for applying for a civil society job – they were dissatisfied with their previous job or jobless, they were offered a job after an internship or knew somebody from the staff. No one told me that his/her specific upbringing made him/her apply. Only later did they express a distinct idea about what it meant to be an activist.<sup>33</sup> The next section looks at how civil society turns people into activists.

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33 There is an interesting difference here between people’s self image and their ascribed identity. While some interns or temporary staff would regard themselves as activists they were never accepted



### **Activism and action: The activist as *zoon politikon***

Action, Hannah Arendt wrote, is the only human activity that takes place entirely between people, not involving things or matter (1958: 9). In action we begin something and insert ourselves into the world; in this respect actions always define the actors. Activists are constituted by their actions, but the doer of deeds has also to be the speaker of words (ibid:179). In Namibian civil society it was not only actions that defined activists but also the ways in which people reinterpreted these actions through stories. Through narrative and action people made it clear what distinguished activists from other NGO employees and which behaviour made people discernible as activists in the in flow of everyday civil society work. The literature on life-stories has portrayed biographies' main function as meaning making (Yarrow 2009) and imposing coherence (Linde 1993). In this view people tell stories about themselves to create a linear account of their life. However, Michael Jackson has argued that storytelling fulfils more complex social functions because it allows people to change the way they remember their past experiences. In his argument, storytelling provides people with the opportunity to remodel their experiences, to negotiate the balance between themselves and the world beyond and to navigate their way through their past life (Jackson 2002:26). Remodelling past experiences was especially important when people talked about the boundaries of civic activism, comparing their work to other sectors and talking about people and organisations that were seen as treating staff in particularly uncivil ways. Experiencing unfair treatment by their NGO left staff with a clear sense of disempowerment and telling stories about the virtues of civil society helped them to regain a sense of agency in those circumstances. This chapter shows that the content of these stories was inseparably linked to the way people told them and both the act of storytelling and the specific story combined were crucial to the production of activists. Analysing the elements in the 'activist story'

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as such until they entered a formal employment with an NGO. Paid employment was therefore a necessary but not sufficient condition to turn people into activists. The temporary character of internships together with hierarchies in organisations let people distinguish between proper NGO staff and associates or volunteers. After having received numerous complaints from volunteers NANGOF drafted a Code of best practices that admonished NGOs to treat their volunteers correctly and to fully integrate them. Still, volunteers occasionally complained that they were never consulted during the project planning stage and were only tasked with implementing programmes, even if they had been working for years in the NGO and knew its work extremely well (Research Notes 30 /10/ 2006 ).

therefore reveals what characteristics NGO staff thought any proper activist ought to have.

### **Telling the activist story**

Activists distinguished themselves from private sector employees and government officials through their commitment. (Research Notes 11/07/ 2008). Especially NGO executives presented their commitment to the cause as the main reason why they chose to work in civil society instead of pursuing equally available and higher paid careers elsewhere. Three months into her contract NANGOF's director received a request from the Board to provide a medical certificate, although she had not been sick since she had started her job. She refused and officially complained that she was not to be treated like this. She was a professional who chose to be in civil society and surely did not need to work for NANGOF as she also headed a successful consultancy firm (Research Notes 11/04/2008). When asked why they worked in civil society despite its lower pay, its comparable meagre benefits and the high insecurity of temporary contracts, many directors said that they enjoyed the work and found it much more fulfilling than the highly paid jobs in private businesses where people were only concerned about enriching themselves (Research Notes 11/07/2008).<sup>34</sup> One director of a human rights NGO pointed out that he would never earn as much as a private lawyer but he had made peace with that.<sup>35</sup> They joked about their small salaries, and often made the comparison between their pay and the earnings of a similarly qualified employee in the private sector. Stories about government – civil society events often included the contrast between the luxurious cars of government employees and the NGO staff arriving by foot or in a communal taxi (Research Notes 10/07/ 2008). One NGO leader said that he by chance saw a bank statement of a private sector employee showing that his petty cash was more than the annual budget of some projects in his NGO.<sup>36</sup>

As Janine Clarke and Wacheke Michuki (2009) noted, people working in civil society derive considerable satisfaction from the idea that their work makes a

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34 Especially people at senior level had often worked in the private sector and/or for the government at some stage in their careers. They therefore felt well equipped to make comparisons between the sectors.

35 Interview Director /Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 18/07/ 2008. As Thomas Yarrow's (2009) account of life stories of civil society workers in Ghana shows, the topic of personal and financial sacrifices were generally prominent elements in stories about activism.

<sup>36</sup> Interview Director /Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 18/072008.

difference in society. This was also true for people in Namibian NGOs who could find an ethical value in doing their particular work technically well (Feldman 2007: 693). When I interviewed the staff of the LAC in 2002 almost all my respondents named the impact their work made on society as one of the main reason for their job satisfaction. What exactly their contribution was depended to a large extent on their position within the LAC and their dominant practices. Lawyers said their work made the law more accessible and assumed that this was a benefit in itself,<sup>37</sup> people in the management stressed that they empowered people to stand up for their rights with a rather vague idea what this meant. Finally social workers spoke mostly about the difference they made in the lives of their specific target groups.

“I think my work is important because it has got a positive impact on people who would otherwise end up as criminals and it changes their lives.”<sup>38</sup>

“The LAC is the only organization that provides legal advice or legal assistance to people (...) who would not have access to justice otherwise”.<sup>39</sup>

“I think our work changes people’s perceptions of the law since they experience the law as being more accessible and effective. Many are becoming aware of the law for the first time through our work.”<sup>40</sup>

Activists thought they could make a real difference in people’s lives because in their perception civil society was finely tuned in to the everyday concerns of ordinary people. One employee at the LAC said that the Centre reached down to the grassroots level.<sup>41</sup> Activists often stressed that the close grassroots connection set them apart from government employees who rarely ventured out to consult “people under the tree” and “who did not know how it is to work with communities where nobody speaks English”.<sup>42</sup> One NGO activist stressed that he wanted to avoid the impression of living in Windhoek’s rich neighbourhood Ludwigsdorf and never ventured into the poor ex-township Katutura when he spoke at a civil society conference about poverty alleviation. Occasionally this grassroots connection became part of the corporate identity of civic organizations. Sectorial umbrellas especially

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37 However, when communities asked the LAC for legal representation the Centre could often not help because a majority of the requests concerned labour or divorce cases, two areas of legal advice the LAC does not provide.

38 Interview social worker Juvenile Justice Project/Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 22/08/ 2002

39 Interview AIDS Law Unit Coordinator/Legal Assistance Centre Windhoek 19/09/2002

40 Interview Gender Unit Coordinator/Legal Assistance Centre Windhoek 20/09/2002

41 Interview Librarian/Legal Assistance Centre Windhoek 27/09/ 2002

42 Interview Director /Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 18/07/ 2008

tended to present members as “their” CBOs to stress the close links between umbrella and rural organizations (Research Notes 22/07/2008). This self image is especially interesting when compared to a recent survey finding about activities of civic organizations across Namibia (NANGOF June 2009). This survey found that most organizations concentrated on pre-defined service delivery instead of wide consultations and close connection to communities.<sup>43</sup> In contrast NGO personnel often seemed to assume that they did not really need to consult people in communities, because they knew intuitively about the people’s greatest concerns and had both the expertise and altruistic drive to take those concerns into the public domain. When I asked the staff at the LAC how they knew which topics were relevant for society, most were irritated at first about the question but then answered that they simply knew because they lived in Namibia (Research Notes 24/08/2006). Presenting at a civil society conference one NGO director asked what civil society is. He answered his rhetorical question by way of an example of two old ladies who decided to take care of the birds in their village. In this image what turned the two ladies into civic activists was their altruistic concern. The director chose the image exactly to make the point that definition of activist does not depend on the person’s management qualities or the corporate efficiency the organization, but that it was passion that made all the difference.<sup>44</sup> Tellingly in his simile the birds could not be asked what their needs really were.

Commitment to the cause was essential, but every real activist had to combine this altruistic concern with profound factual expertise. When civil society organizations advertised jobs the first criteria for potential candidates was expertise, i.e. education plus experience rather than insights into the sector, commitment or a particular close connection with beneficiaries; a close connection to recipients was therefore not the most important criteria for most organisations. In fact a good activist had to maintain a certain distance from beneficiaries to enable her/him to calculate the benefits of a project accurately. One LAC employee said “The work (of the LAC) is much more efficient than it has been (...) the system is much better than before because in previous times we were driving the whole country just to help one person

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<sup>43</sup> For a similar finding in South Africa see Nauta 2004

<sup>44</sup> The idealized image of rural old women as prime focus of civic activism is analyzed in greater detail in chapter 3.

in Mariental and the next in Oshakati”.<sup>45</sup> For him, previous results clearly had not justified the effort.

For people in civil society, factual expertise prevented committed NGO staff to become partial because it enabled activists to weigh costs and benefits of their projects and to analyze their own work critically. Expertise was important for any good activist and essential for a successful civil society organization. The Legal Assistance Centre took pride in the expertise of its staff<sup>46</sup> and several other NGO directors suggested that government should concentrate on policy making and leave implementation to the experts in civil society.<sup>47</sup> When the director of the Desert Research Foundation (DRFN) introduced the NGO to the new NANGOF staff he emphasized that the DRFN represented the highest concentration of environmental experts in the country (Research Notes 29/05/2008). The project coordinator of the LAC’s gender unit said that her project was now so successful because it had produced high quality work over long time.

“The gender law unit is (...) one of the oldest units in the LAC, in previous times we experienced severe difficulties with our lobbying work to influence governmental decisions; but we always did high-quality work and eventually government could not ignore us any longer – people would ask why decision-makers did not take our reports into account. So now government relies heavily on our reports and findings and we have a high degree of influence on the making of gender-related laws – but it took us a long (...) time and continuous high-quality work to get there (...) I think it is of special importance for the LAC to maintain a high standard of thorough and high quality work to maintain its credibility and reputation as this is the best way to overcome opposition.”<sup>48</sup>

Her account reveals another important quality of true activists: patience and persistence in adverse conditions and despite repeated setbacks. The key in her success was that her project continued to invest in high quality research, and although they had been ignored for long time this finally paid off. Another organization has been trying for decades to talk to government officials about the fate of people who were detained by SWAPO during the liberation struggle. According to its national

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45 Oshakati is a town located in the north of Namibia, about a thousand kilometres away from Mariental in the country’s south. Interview Land and Environment Project Coordinator/Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 24/09/2002.

46 Interviews AIDS Law Unit Coordinator/ Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 19/09/2002, Interview Gender Unit Coordinator/Legal Assistance Centre Windhoek 20/09/2002, Interview Director/ Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 18/07/2008.

47 Research Notes 10/07/2008; Interviews 10/06/2008, 12/06/2008 and 18/07/2008.

48 Interview Gender Unit Coordinator/Legal Assistance Centre 20/09/2002.

coordinator the organisation hoped that its persistence would finally pay off and its representatives would be granted a hearing with the president.<sup>49</sup> The previous coordinator of the LAC's Legal Education project said that the LAC was so important because "it remains steadfast even if everybody else is jumping the ship".<sup>50</sup> All these examples suggest that a proper activist does not seek short term success but invests in long term structural changes at considerable personal and institutional costs.<sup>51</sup>

Perseverance was seen as essential characteristic of activists, because they had to stick to their cause in the face of adverse external conditions. But they also had to be persistent with regard to their own training and be willing to continuously improve their expertise, a pursuit that was above all visible in the high value civil society placed on training. An entire section of civic organisations has specialised in training employees from other NGOs. There is a large market for this service, because organisations with sufficient resources invest in training for their staff, grant sabbatical leave and might even support their employees to attend professional development courses in South Africa. Donors too had funded capacity building for years and had especially supported project management workshops in order to receive better funding proposals. On the one hand, donor representatives complained that the continuing training did not result in visibly improved projects.<sup>52</sup> NGO staff on the other hand often pointed out that the training they received did not add up to a recognised qualification and was too isolated to really build a new field of expertise. They said their training modules did not add up. They were consequently trained in one skill without having the necessary knowledge to implement it properly and it had only unclear relevance for their everyday work. As one NGO representative put it: "We have found training is often not as useful as it could be without time to implement and develop skills in the work place".<sup>53</sup> The next section asks why civil society employees continued to invest in training despite the widespread perception that training had only limited impact on people's work. It shows that civil society employees invested in the training modules that confirmed the stories they told about themselves as activists.

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49 Interview BWS National coordinator, Windhoek 21/05/2008.

50 Interview Legal Education Project Coordinator/Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 05/09/ 2002.

51 In many LAC interviews respondents said that the Centre had often been called names for its work and seemed to take a certain pride in this.

52 Interview USAID Country Representative 23/11/ 2006.

53 NANGOF June 2009:43, NGO Institute 2009.

### **Training: Becoming better at doing good**

In 2006 donors and civil society organizations teamed up to establish the “Civil society management qualification” (CSMQ), a comprehensive training initiative for NGO staff. Three civil society organizations, INARA, NANASO and NANGOF founded the NGO institute to host the scheme. The CSMQ is divided into seven broad areas of NGO management: Governance, General Management, Financial Management, Project Management, Resource Mobilisation and Leadership (NGO Institute 2009). Those seven areas contain 23 different modules or “unit standards” NGO employees can take up independently to build their own individual careers. They can also apply to be assessed without prior training in areas they feel already competent in. The CSMQ claims to train people in skills they really need and help them to build a competency based career path in civil society (NGO Institute 2009). The CSMQ is based on the idea that civil activism is a craft and can be taught systematically through discrete complementary modules which will turn lay persons into activists. The training breaks with the common practice in civil society that people could work in a completely different capacity once they changed jobs within the sector. This practice allowed people to be a training officer at one NGO, an administrator in the next and a fundraiser in the third organisation. The CSMQ in contrast formalises and fixes career paths in civil society and prevents these vertical careers, which respondents in a survey of NGO workers in Jordan explicitly valued in their jobs (Clarke/Michuki 2009). The CSMQ’s training units are accredited with the Namibian national qualifications authority (NQA), the state agency to unify vocational training across Namibia. The CSMQ embodies the idea that civic activism is a trade to be learnt like carpentry and that it is technical skills and knowledge that are the most important elements in civic activism.

The literature on new managerialism in NGOs seems to confirm these assumptions. It has argued that civic organisations are increasingly defined by management concepts like accountability, transparency, participation, and efficiency, as well as practices like double-entry bookkeeping, strategic planning, Logical Framework Analysis, project evaluation, and organizational self-assessment (Roberts/Jones/Fröhling 2005). Management skills are also the main focus of the Namibian civil society qualification. The CSMQ is supposed to include everything a

good NGO leader ought to know and is based on general ideas about the necessary skills in civil society anywhere, instead of taking into account the skills necessary in Namibia. The unit standards followed the civil society training modules in Botswana and Swaziland and were drafted by an international advisor to NANGOF with qualifications including a degree in business administration from London Business School. The CSMQ is based on the idea that training is a de-contextualised accumulation of universal knowledge that lead to the professionalisation of organisations and their staff.

An alternative view on training sees more in education than “just” a convenient tool to drive the sector to increased business efficiency. It argues that training is a mechanism through which individuals turn themselves into self-governing subjects (Martin et al 1988, Bondi/Laurie 2003). This Foucauldian perspective on training therefore refutes the idea that there is a stable self whose essence remains unchanged by the knowledge or skills that training provides. It equally challenges the idea that people internalise external values conveyed through training and that education can mould individuals as passive recipients of external influences. The person is neither unchangeable nor completely determined from outside, but people actively engage training modules to raise their self-awareness and thus to regulate their own conduct in civil society. Self awareness and self governance were central in the civil society’s management qualification. For example the module on “manage organisational values and the legal framework of an NGO” attempts to teach Board members to “act in a social responsible way” and “understand their legal, social and ethical responsibilities.” Other units teach NGO personnel how to produce a “unique identifying idea” and how to implement the organisational vision (NGO Institute 2006).

The technical knowledge training provides might add one aspect of what it means to be an activist and the idea that activism is a trade to be learnt reflects a widespread opinion in civil society. Seeing training as a technique of the self would explain why it has to be constantly repeated, because producing self governing activists depends on constant repetition. However, the assumption that training moulds the activist self far overestimates the importance of training in civil society.



Most people in civil society saw their training as separate from their proper work. Training provided them with an additional qualification they could pursue if they wanted to. They said that one of the real advantages of working in civil society was that organisations often provided them with the freedom to pursue additional qualifications. Training was therefore not seen as inherent in activism. NGO executives complained that once their staff received training they would leave their organisation for better paid jobs in other sectors.<sup>54</sup> None of my informants saw any direct link between his/her qualification and what it meant to be an activist and did not share the close connection between training and the activist self the literature made. Formal training had also limited influence on the professional standard in the sector. Donors complained that numerous fundraising workshops had not lifted the quality of NGOs' funding applications<sup>55</sup> and the main argument for the management qualification was that the continuous financial training did not significantly improve the financial management in a majority of NGOs (NANGOF March 2007). NGO staff often complained that the generic training they received was ill adapted to their NGO work and that they had often lacked the opportunity to implement their new skills (NANGOF June 2009). In sum, training was far too removed from their proper work in people's understanding to be either a technique to constitute the subject or a tool to bring about professionalisation in civil society.

However, training occupies an important place in civil society, because it is a measurable unit of activity. It is a central request from donors and it is a tangible project component. Training is quantifiable and categorisable, the number of workshops can be included in (donor) reports and the certificates of attendance and achievement create the impression that the trainees have progressed in their career and done something concrete to bring themselves and their organization forward. Donors and NGOs are not the only ones investing in training. NGO employees themselves often spent considerable amount of their time and money on training, because they obviously believed in its value. Attending workshop and short courses should not be easily dismissed as window dressing for donors, because it had concrete value for people. Irrespective of its specific content, the training provided employees with the

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54 Interview Director/ Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 18/07/ 2008; Interview Country Director Project Hope, Windhoek 12/06/2008.

55 Interview Country Representative USAID 23/11/2006; Interview Country Director Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Windhoek 09/11/2006.

opportunity to leave the office and thus gave their work routine a new impetus. Meeting peers in training sessions and getting new ideas from them provided people with the necessary motivation to carry on.<sup>56</sup> More importantly, training could be well integrated into stories people told about themselves because receiving and providing training spoke to people's self image as experts.

People in civil society evaluated training depending on how well it fitted the dominant storyline about activism and some courses were a better match than others. Modules like "Managing organizational values", "promoting an organization" and "raising funds" usually spoke more to core elements in activists' self image and were thus taken up by many more people than financial management courses.<sup>57</sup> Activists particularly shunned training about purely financial or administrative issues, what they saw as the dispassionate side of the job. The contrasting attitudes to (different) training modules point to a fundamental ambiguity of training for people's story. Training did speak to people's self image as experts and was therefore highly valued, but training also attempted to create a dispassionate professional for whom civic activism was a task to be administered. Training sought to establish civic activism as vocation in the Weberian sense, where activists were the administrators of projects, efficient and *sine ira et studio*, 'without hate and eagerness' (Weber 1970: 95). Training did therefore not turn people into activists, but certain modules confirmed the story people told about themselves. This also explains why some workshops proved to be influential for NGOs' work while other training units failed to have any visible impact.

### *The limits of civic activism:*

#### **Vanity and hierarchy**

The kind of expertise people thought to be essential for civic activists was therefore not purely factual. Technical knowledge had to be combined with

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56 Chapter 4 makes a similar argument about civil society-wide meetings as "hope-generating machines" (Nujiten 2006).

57 NANGOF (March 2007a) shows a very low achievement rate in finance courses. When NANGOF's director talked about the CSMQ she said that she once did a course on financial management for non finance people which did not help her daily work. The comment shows first that she did not regard her job to be mostly about financial skills and secondly that she thought that financial management training could not be transferred from the private to the non- profit sector, because their purposes were different in kind ; an argument that is elaborated in chapter 7.

experience and passion for the job if a person ever wanted to be a good activist. With that self image of being true and committed experts in their field came a more or less open vanity of which Max Weber once said was a politician's occupational disease but harmless (Weber 1970:116). Many activists were convinced that important events could not happen without their participation, even when they were hopelessly over-committed and could not possibly attend. One member of the NANGOF Board announced a few days before the Board meeting that she had another appointment and demanded that NANGOF rescheduled the meeting that had been set for months. The secretariat should invite all 16 members for the following week so that she could participate. Another Board member asked whether she could send a delegate to the same meeting, because she was out of the country, but still wanted to have a say in the decisions (Research Notes 29/05/2008).

More seriously, ideas about one's own indispensability and unrivalled expertise occasionally resulted in activists deciding single-handedly about projects. The LAC once agreed to represent a very poor neighbourhood that demanded free water supply from the Windhoek City council in court. A senior member of staff prepared the court case but decided to withdraw the lawsuit after the city council had approached him and asked for an out-of-court settlement. The LAC lawyer had decided to drop the case without consulting with his clients and without having asked any of his colleagues in the LAC. Many in the Centre at that time complained about the uncooperative attitude underlying this decision and also blamed him for the bad press the NGO received for its withdrawal (Research Notes 28/02/2008). The example points to the downside of activists' self image as experts. Since they were so convinced by their own knowledge some activists felt they did not need second opinions from colleagues or recipients. One project lawyer at the LAC complained that there was no real team spirit in the centre and people were not interested in staff meetings, they would not prepare for them or did not even turn up.<sup>58</sup> LAC staff who claimed to be well-informed about work of other departments in the Centre because they read the reports regularly, but this would be a matter of choice, as the coordinator of the LAC's gender unit put it "we here in Windhoek are very "paper-oriented".<sup>59</sup> This indicates that people talked very little about a project during its planning stage or even when it was running, they only informed colleagues in the same way they told

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58 Interview AIDS Law Unit Coordinator/ Legal Assistance Centre Windhoek 19/09/2002.

59 Interview Gender Unit Coordinator/ Legal Assistance Centre Windhoek 20/09/2002.

the general public about it and only once the work had been done. The previous director of the LAC said that coordination within the centre was sometimes difficult, because some people did not want to collaborate with others until the management intervened to foster cooperation across units.<sup>60</sup>

Tensions arose not only because of non-collegial solo efforts, but were also created through formal and informal hierarchies in organizations. Those rankings were often based on the corporate identity and the public image of the NGO. The LAC has always presented itself as public interest law firm, although it had hosted several projects that did not do any litigation. This resulted in a clear hierarchy between lawyers and other employees like administrators, accountants, social workers and educators. Several employees complained that the organization only treated some people as core staff and paid them considerably higher salaries than others. The project coordinator of one unit complained:

If a lawyer who just started [at the centre] earns more money than a person who has been working for the LAC for years this has definitely an impact on the attitude of this person and will lead to a decreased job satisfaction. I think they [management] should look more at what the person is actually doing rather than a certain label like “lawyer”, “social worker” etc.<sup>61</sup>

Complaints about organizational hierarchies did not fit the image of civil society as benign sector and a good place to work. This often created a considerable ambivalence in employees who found their work and the organization important, but had really disheartening experiences of being treated unfairly by that same organization.<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, employees themselves often tried to rescue the image of civil society organizations as good places to work, although their personal experience contradicted this image. When the post of the LAC director became vacant the then head of the LAC’s legal education project applied. He was short-listed and the LAC Board decided to offer him the job. However, this triggered massive resistance from other LAC employees and the job offer was withdrawn at the last minute, officially because of insufficient transparency in the decision-making process. When the job

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60 Interview ex-Director/Legal Assistance Centre/Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 27/08/2002.

61 Interview social worker Juvenile Justice Project/Legal Assistance Centre 22/08/2002.

62 The literature on civil society has long challenged the idea of civil society as particular benign sector, from theoretical accounts (Foley/Edwards 1998; Howell/Pearce 2002) to concrete case studies (Hirschmann 1998; Glaser 1997) and arguments about global civil society (Munck 2002) authors have repeatedly shown that many civil society organizations are based on steep hierarchies and are particularly uncivil to their employees.

was advertised again he re-applied, but this time the people who had opposed him in the first round encouraged another LAC employee to apply who was eventually offered the job. When the ousted coordinator told me the story he still felt treated unfairly. However he did not blame the LAC's culture of favouring some people over others but made a few individuals responsible for the decision. As he himself noted with a smile, he is now employed by a completely different organization, but still says "we" when he talks about the LAC (Research Notes 15/02/2008). With hindsight he could even find some understanding for the people who had opposed him. He said most probably they had felt unsure about somebody who had not been with the LAC for long, because all previous directors had a long track record of employment with the LAC. He was the first one to apply after only a year of being with the centre, whereas the current LAC director has been with the LAC since its early days. His interpretation suggests that a proper activist had to prove her/his continuous commitment by working in civil society for some time before s/he could attempt to proceed to a senior position.

A statement from NANGOF's former interim director combines a belief in the good cause of the organisation with a note of personal hurt in a similar way:

"For me, NANGOF is a good thing. But it has to earn the credibility through efficiency and action. (...) More generally, I have a sense that I have been thoroughly dropped by NANGOF. I believe that they have tidied up the database and destroyed a vast section of data bank. I have a sense that I am being blamed for the shortcomings in relation to PE1. It is quite an affront really, although bad for one's reputation. For some reason they seem to have come to the view that I should have done a full time job for the small consultancy fees that we generated. The other week, they "launched" the NANGOF Trust with a dinner. I was not invited. All sour grapes."<sup>63</sup>

Both show this ambiguous opinion about "their" former organisation. They showed an intense sense of attachment and really cared where the organisation was heading, but also felt deeply disappointed with the way they had been treated, a feeling that only came with a profound fondness for the organisation and a sense of personal attachment. The strong loyalty that had distinguished them as true activists when they were still working for "their" NGO did obviously not cease after they had left the sector and stopped seeing themselves as activists.

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<sup>63</sup> Email conversation, former NANGOF Interim Director, 30/06/2009.

Former NGO employees often pointed to an organisation's special circumstances or its bad leadership to explain the apparent differences between negative experiences and their positive image of civil society organisations. Board members often justified smaller salaries and harsh employment conditions with imperatives of organisational survival. Organisational survival was said to be the reason why one NGO refused to release its sick director on extended leave and she had to come in a few days every week to secure her job. The same NGO did not pay its janitor and cleaners for several months until they had to seek employment elsewhere (Research Notes 02/05/2008). This was arguably a really exceptional case and many other organisations looked after their employees well, but still quite a few took advantage of people's commitment by expecting them to work overtime and paying their salaries late in times of crisis. People occasionally said that some NGOs were run as one (wo)man show<sup>64</sup> but they always presented this as result of bad (individual) leadership which could be rectified through a few management decisions and some staff replacements. Everyone who complained about the steep hierarchies within the LAC recommended that the management should rectify these artificial rankings through a payment review and a reversal of the unpopular decision to move one unit from the Centre's headquarters into a suburb. Nobody saw hierarchies as integral part of the LAC's corporate image as public interest law firm that sought to assert a high reputation amongst policy makers and donors as expert organisation in legal issues. And nobody questioned the Centre's claim to be the linchpin of human rights culture in Namibia.

### **Employees, not activists**

If comments on uncivil organizational practices show strategies people used to reconcile reality and ideal, comments about uncivil people reveal that in fact not all civil society employees were automatically regarded as activists. Activists and non-activists were therefore not distinguished through their formal work contract with an NGO, but through specific traits of character like altruistic commitment, expertise and persistence as explained above. However these were not sufficient and proper activist had to show more elusive traits of character, which were all related to the way they behaved in civil society - wide processes. These characteristics were much closer

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64 Interview Country Director Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Windhoek 01/12/2006.

linked to incivility in the stricter sense of the term. Uncivil were those who overrated their own importance; those solo performers who obviously used civil society's structures only to pursue their personal agendas. Uncivil people demanded that long-arranged meetings should be postponed on short notice to fit in their full diaries and pushed their way into projects without considering other ideas.

Comments about one director of a new NGO contained several elements that were seen as being uncivil. She had been working for the national right wing party before she was expelled and formed an NGO. From the very start she made it clear that she needed NANGOF to pursue an election monitoring project for the upcoming 2009 parliamentary elections. She convinced people to vote her on the NANGOF Board, although she had been bad mouthing other Board members, saying they were inefficient, had no mandate and only served on the Board, because there was no mechanism to vote them out of office. Other directors found her pushy or focused, depending on sympathy and context. She was obviously not the only person who used civil society to pursue a particular project: in fact NANGOF has been promoting its facilitating role for civil society wide concerns and some of the most successful and highly regarded activists were driven by particular concerns. Comments about her tended to be much more critical, because she was new to the sector and could therefore not prove that she indeed had the persistence that was seen as necessary element in any real commitment to the cause. Some suspected she simply used civil society as shortcut to achieve her own political agenda (Research Notes 06/06/2009).

As organisational incivility was usually explained with the organisation's exceptional circumstances, uncivil behaviour of individuals was often ridiculed as personal oddity and never linked to the general self image of activists as committed experts that gave rise to their ideas about their own indispensability.<sup>65</sup> Achille Mbembe stressed that ridicule is a form of distancing oneself from what is perceived as deeply tragic and potentially dangerous, but which lies beyond one's control (2001:109). Activists ridiculed incivility in order to cope with the challenges to their own stories about civil society; challenges which were both profound and outside their influence.<sup>66</sup> Explanations for incivility therefore always pointed to the exception

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65 One NANGOF ex-employee said that some Trustees were simply "glory seekers" Research Notes 10/03/2008.

66 This also confirms Michael Jackson's (2002: 28) point that telling stories is an important mechanism to re-live experiences and regain some degree of control over them.



which left the image of civil society as usually benign sector with altruistic and committed people untouched.<sup>67</sup>

### *Gossip and the banality of activism*

Ridicule often came in the form of gossip, small stories told to illustrate how things ought not to be done in civil society. When the NANGOF team discussed whether Board members should receive a small salary the previous interim director made it clear that serving on a Board was a prestigious office. Board membership was by definition unpaid, in order to avoid people taking up office for the monetary reward. He argued that one Board member in particular had repeatedly asked for compensation and indicated that this person was more interested in the benefits the Board membership offered than in NANGOF's cause. The ex-director illustrated his point by telling how the same board member had missed a particular good funding opportunity for NANGOF and later tried to cover his mistake up. In his opinion this incident showed that the Board member was more interested in his own benefits than in the advancement of NANGOF and was "a difficult person" to work with (Research Notes 28/03/2008).

Classical accounts have conceptualized gossip as an informal way to assert group values, to determine group membership (Gluckman 1963) and to discipline individuals when an open confrontation was not viable (Herskovitz 1937). Robert Paine (1967) and John Roberts (1964) argued that gossip does not in itself promote or avoid conflict, but catalyses social relations and processes.<sup>68</sup> NANGOF's director mirrored this view that gossip first and foremost created a negative public image. She warned against letting NANGOF critics participate in decision-making panels,

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67 As much as fending off challenges to the image of civil society, coping strategies also attempted to avoid ruptures in the coherent stories activists told about themselves. As Charlotte Linde (1989) has pointed out the need to create coherent stories twists evidence and memories and let speaker and addressee stress particular events and neglect others. For a literary treatment of this topic see Milan Kundera's "Book of Laughter and Forgetting" (1980).

68 Sally Engle Merry (1997) notes that this catalysing function is the main reason why it is so difficult for outsiders to fully understand gossip. Ethnographers have to understand the underlying values and master a vast amount of information about people and their relations, in order to grasp the full implications of gossip. It is therefore highly doubtful that my analysis can catch all layers of meaning in civil society's gossip.



because they could spread misinformation and discredit the umbrella through gossiping about it (Research Notes 03/06/ 2008).

The more recent literature on gossip has paid more attention to gossip's organization and content, instead of focusing on its function alone. Jörg Bergmann (1993: 151) states that gossip is designed as news for a distinct social group, i.e. participants must know each other well and the gossiping process must be mutual (Merry 1997: 52). Gossip in civil society was usually shared amongst smaller circles of people who knew each other well and had very regular contact, and gossip was consequently most often exchanged between (former) colleagues or people who had been working in the same field for a long time.

Sally Engle Merry has argued that most gossip concerns the gap between people's claims to reputation and their actual behaviour (1997: 53). Gossip therefore naturally unfolds around topics where the social ideal is very demanding. NGOs' claim to the moral high ground and their propagated pro-poor agenda were thus obvious targets for gossip. The greedy demand of the NANGOF Board member stood in sharp contrast to the altruistic mission of his NGO. At a national conference NANGOF staff joked about the director of a women's organisation with a strong poverty agenda, because she drove a Mercedes (Research Notes 11/07/2008). Staff at a women's rights project often gossiped about the authoritarian leadership style of the project coordinator which stood in sharp contrast to the project's democratic agenda and empowering objectives. Through gossip NGO staff applied abstract rules of conduct to concrete situations and thus shared the interpretation of the moral meaning of these events (Merry 1997). As Sally Engle Merry (1997:48) notes, gossip only has any disciplining effect on individual behaviour if it endangers a person's status, something that was highly unlikely when staff joked about superiors.

The most important role of gossip was thus not necessarily to enforce particular behaviour, but to create a shared understanding of proper behaviour in civil society amongst the gossipers. Gossipy anecdotes were admittedly small and often told on the side more for entertainment than as intentional discussion of the right kind of activism. However, since they were small and could easily be inserted into conversations they were often repeated and thus achieved a particular salience. As Michael Billig (1995) has argued it is the less dramatic symbols of and tales about big

concepts like nationalism that have the most lasting effect on our beliefs and actions. Gossip was an important element in this “banal activism” to paraphrase Michael Billig. Jokes about different salaries of government and civil society employees, anecdotes about the mismatch between people’s personal wealth and their NGO’s pro-poor agenda and side complaints about hierarchies in human rights organisations constantly reminded people of civil society’s ideals and what civic activism ought to be about. They did so much more frequently and thus more powerfully than the organisations’ mission or grand statements about civil society’s value in society.

Ongoing conversations created lasting images of particular people working in civil society. Some people were seen as being inspired and motivated but overworked and thus rather unreliable, some had the reputation of being very ambitious but creating unrest. Still others counted as good natured and reconciling but as weak leaders. Once somebody had acquired the image of being uncivil, it stuck to the person and was particularly difficult to undo. The images were so resistant to change, because they were part of stories that were constantly retold amongst a small group of people over a long period of time. Many people currently employed by an NGO had been working in the sector since the country’s independence. The senior level had an especially low turnover rate. If an organization advertised for a new director, very often candidates were drawn from its staff pool or other civil society organizations. NANGOF’s new executive director was project coordinator in another NGO before, and all other candidates had worked on project management level in other NGOs.<sup>69</sup> People working in civil society therefore had developed long term professional relations and were connected through multiple links. They were not only colleagues who worked in similar positions; often one person sat on the Board of another; they were often peers in NANGOF’s sector working groups or other umbrella forums or competitors for funding<sup>70</sup> or previous superiors (Research Notes 01/07/2008). People maintained multiple relations at once because activists in Namibia often fulfilled many more roles than “just” being employed by a civic organisation. Besides their regular full time job as NGO executives, financial managers or project coordinators, they usually served on Boards of several other civil society organisations, they were

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69 The only other good source for employees was international volunteering organizations. A lot of people came to Namibia as an NGO intern or through international work placement programmes and then stayed.

70 See chapter 6.

members of permanent working groups set up by umbrella bodies or the government and many also ran their own business to take up occasional consultancy work. People thus met in different capacities and constellations and therefore knew each other's work in various roles. They could rely on a good insight about how somebody acted as peer, superior, evaluator, or employee and brought all these insights to the conversation about specific people.

Comments on people in civil society were everyday occasions that set the scene before the scheduled "proper" discussion started. In this they created a shared understanding of what civil society was all about. These stories created a closely knit network in a small sector with low turnover and a high degree of personal links between NGOs. The activist self is therefore narrated as the proponents of the biographical approach claim, but not as in a personal history but in ongoing conversations. Before they joined civil society many NGO employees had been working in other fields.<sup>71</sup> NANGOF's director had been working as a social worker for the government, another executive had been a teacher and a bank clerk, some had worked for a newspaper or the radio, were private consultants or lawyers. When asked why they applied for an NGO position none of the LAC respondents pointed to particular values in their upbringing that made civil society work especially attractive. They often knew somebody from the LAC or plainly needed a job.<sup>72</sup> It was only after they had started to work at the centre that they became aware of the difference their work made in society, and it was only then that tackling injustices figured as major reason why they thought their job was sensible. People therefore first joined an NGO and then became activists.

Since activists were essentially a product of civil society, people ceased to be activists by leaving the sector. The literature has admittedly paid far less attention to the unmaking of activists than it did to the analysis of how activists are created. However, arguing that activists are defined through his/her socialisation seems to

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71 This is especially true for older employees because most NGOs were only set up after 1990.

72 This is quite different to Thomas Yarrow's (2009) findings where people often told their life story to explain why they decided to work for civil society.

suggest that once a person turned into an activist this could not be so easily reversed. The end of activists in Namibia was much more banal than this. People did not change their basic values and quite a few pursued “civic activist” goals in other sectors, e.g. human rights promotion in academia or as private lawyers, development projects through the government’s development ministry, or they pursued their research interests through private consultancy firms. Leaving a paid NGO job did not mean that people automatically resigned from voluntary offices in the sector, and quite a few continued to serve on the Board of their former employer but they would no longer see themselves as activists. The end of activists thus relates to the quote at the beginning: people did not see themselves as activists anymore once they left their formal employment with a civil society organisation and started working somewhere else. It shows that formal employment with a civil society organisation was a necessary, but not sufficient, precondition for people to become activists. Just as people continued to pursue their activist goals in other sectors, they often continued to volunteer for their organisation, be it as Trustee or as external advisor without referring to themselves as activists. One of the reasons why formal employment might be so decisive for people’s definition of “activists” was that it provided the opportunity to regularly participate in ongoing conversations about peers and because it provided the person with a clear organisational affiliation. Activist identity was therefore closely connected to people’s official status, their social networks, dominant practices and narratives within sector.

### *Conclusion: Civic activists and civil society*

Stories about activists were usually weaved into general conversations about the nature of civil society and were often expressed in forums when people talked about the entire sector e.g. in its relations to the government or in comments on civil society’s contributions to national development. Any NGO had to employ people with the right traits of character in order to ensure organisational survival and to promote the strength of the entire sector. That was the reason why stories about activists were always also statements about civil society. Personal commitment was often blended with good leadership and management skills, a good feeling for people, donors and

recipients, and good intuition for trends.<sup>73</sup> However, the real activist did not measure these skills in monetary terms alone and those seeking highly paid jobs were unsuitable for civic activism irrespective of their other talents. Commenting on prospective successors for one NGO director, an NGO Board member said that they had found a woman well qualified and fit to do the job but who refused to be employed for the current director's salary. This was seen as clear indication that she was not suitable for the job because obviously she had more interest in her salary than the work.<sup>74</sup>

This chapter's counterintuitive conclusion is thus that activists do not create civil society, but civil society creates activists and it does so not through formalized training but through everyday stories and ongoing gossip. The finding stands in direct contrast to the leading research question in new social movement theories that seek to unearth a distinct set of reasons why people become activists before they join social movements, and look for this set in people's upbringing and value system. This chapter shows that activists were defined through ongoing conversations amongst their peers which also marked the difference between activists and government officials or donor representatives. Activists demonstrated expertise, persistence, loyalty and commitment vis-à-vis their peers, donors and government officials, but were not defined by their close relations to recipients. Instead, activists were produced by the particular ways in which civil society was enacted. It shows that if we want to understand civil society we need to explore how exactly it is done, which the remainder of the thesis will do.

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73 Interview Director /Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 18/07/2008; Interview Country Director Project Hope, Windhoek 12/06/2008.

74 Interview Country Director Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Windhoek 01/12/2006.

### Chapter 3 Documents and Databases

Documents are the single most important artefacts in civil society. Legal deeds and constitutions found NGOs and lay out their basic modes of operation (Prior 2003: 60). Project proposals and progress reports generate organisations' revenues by making NGOs legible for donors and the state: "accountable" in development-speak. Databases arrange knowledge about organisational action and their designs highlight certain data at the expense of other information. By setting the legitimate frame for civic activism documents like ethical codes and terms of reference render particular interventions justifiable while excluding other activities. Reports give evidence of NGO activities to external actors and thus function as main proof of organizational action. They present a particular image of the organisation to the outside world, a representation often repeated in concise form in leaflets, banners and other promotional material. In sum documents assemble knowledge about civic activism in particular ways and tend to present this order as natural (Heimer 2006; Latour 1996: 35). The analytical focus of this chapter is what documents do in civil society and, through attention to their aesthetics, how they do it. It argues that documents are "good to think with" (Henare et al 2006) and that seeing them as actants (Latour 1996) provides a particularly apt way to understand civil society's practice of documenting. Documents as actants instigate social action and are therefore far more than just tools, which civic organisations use to achieve particular goals.

Funding agencies require so many documents from civil society organisations that the high level of papers within the sector could easily be seen as direct result of the accountability debate and a decisive push from donors for more transparency in civic activism.<sup>76</sup> To document has become a practice in its own right in civil society and many of the buzzwords of civil society funding like transparency and accountability in fact call for documentation (Riles 2000: 6). Donors do not only require a description of the proposed project, but also a high number of what Richard Harper has called "mundane documents" (1998: 13) about different aspects of the applying organisation, for example statements of employment equality, proof of

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76 See Riles 2006: 6. The academic debate in the 1990s about NGOs' lack of accountability had a clear impact on this development. The literature of that time suggested that donors should enforce more documentation of NGO activity in order to make them more accountable and transparent. (Charlton/May 1995; Edwards/Hulme 1996).

legality, bank accounts, constitutions, past reports and audits. When NANGOF applied for a grant from the Ford Foundation the Foundation asked for so many papers that NANGOF's executive director complained that she had "never sent to many documents at once in her life" (Research Notes 12/05/008).

However, documents play significant roles in civic organisations which go far beyond their function in the funding cycle and some documents are even projects in their own right for which NGOs regularly seek donor assistance. This chapter's major case studies are databases, because they are often seen to be the core of a civil society organization.<sup>77</sup> Databases generate their own projects – organisations often have a separate budget to establish and maintain databases and to create directories, reports or statistics from them. The number of entries and columns are often cited to demonstrate organizational achievements and the breath of an NGO's network. Looking at databases, but also at grant applications, feedback reports and directories this chapter focuses on the multiple roles of such documents. It shows how documents delineate the space for the legitimate action which structures organisations' interactions with beneficiaries, their peers, the state and donors.

### *Documents as things*

This analysis takes an interest in the ways in which documents and people's behaviour are shaped and transformed by their mutual relations. Documents are seen as interactive things rather than tools.<sup>78</sup> It draws on ideas developed by a "thing theory" in archaeology and social sciences (Brown 2001, Gosden et al 1999; Domanska 2006), which argues that relations between people and things are not reducible to crude functionalism. This means that people do not only use documents for particular goals, they engage in a dialogue with them that shapes their social reality. Documents interact with people and through that interaction make particular social conducts possible. Agency is therefore not restricted to people but can be an

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77 All three organisations discussed in this chapter, NANASO, NANGOF, and Project Hope, rely heavily on their database in their project designs and invest considerable time and money in their maintenance as will be shown.

78 See Martin Heidegger's (1996:61) distinction between the *Vorhandenheit* (availability) of objects as tools handled by actors and the *Zuhandenheit* (handiness) of things that interact with people to create something new and unexpected.

attribute of non- humans and non-individuals (Latour 1996; Debery/Turgeon 2007:51). As Richard Harper (1998) argued the relation between text and user is always active and transformational, changing both the document and its reader in the process. His study of documents' "career" within the International Monetary Fund shows how a document's interaction with its readers changes over the course of passing through different organizational divisions and how the same document thus becomes a different kind of thing depending on which department handles it. An IMF country report is seen by its authors as proof of their detailed knowledge and long engagement with a specific country. The Fund's 'documents processing unit' treats the report as a file to be tagged and catalogued, the Board finally uses reports as policy documents that guide decision making (1998: 4) and Richard Harper shows how documents establish a particular link with each of these different users. It is their "will to connect" (Brown/Capdevila 1999: 41; Hetherington 1997) that provides the very core of their agency, transforming documents into "actants" (Latour 1996:6) that instigate social action instead of being only the result of it.

Accordingly the chapter's analytical focus is on the kind of interaction documents enable (Riles 2000:126) by "drawing things together" (Latour 1990), i.e. by bringing diverse subjects and mediums together on a single sheet of paper and thus representing a particular view of the world in convincing and powerful ways (Harper 1998: 35). Documents impose certain orders of meaning on the (users') engagement that exclude alternative perspectives (Latour 1990). Carol Heimer (2006) compared biographical narratives about critically ill infants with their standardized hospital files and showed how these different types of documents produced very different kinds of knowledge about the same person, warranting distinct courses of action. The different accounts resulted from the specific categories the documents included, but also from the way those categories were arranged: numerical and comparative in hospital records, personal and over time in biographical accounts. In a similar way the chapter shows how content and layout of civil society reports produced a particularly technical knowledge about project recipients and about NGOs' action, that made civic activism comparable across organisations which excluded all ambiguity from the final document.

As Adam Reed (2006) has shown, condensed documents are valued by their authors for the stories they invoke. His study in a jail in Papua New Guinea analyzed how prisoners engaged with their own one-page self description of their situation. He



demonstrated that they valued their so-called “autographs” because the compressed expression with its many short forms invoked long strands of memories and prompted them to retell detailed stories about their prison life. Autographs therefore contracted social experiences in prison into a few abbreviations. Reed’s study shows that readers interact with documents in various ways and that documents are far more than simple tools for domination or resistance as an overtly strategic analysis of them would assume. He shows that documents are good to think with if the analysis explores their content and form instead of trying to determine their instrumental value. This chapter employs a similar analysis of civil society documents. Instead of seeing them as mundanely strategic tools to advance or resist particular agendas it shows how a document-centric approach can reveal the various roles of documents in Namibia’s civic activism.

The document-centric analysis of this chapter uses databases as case studies and pays particular attention to the database of NANGOF’s members and the database of beneficiaries in the micro-credit programme of one AIDS service organization. Databases are particularly central for civic organisations: Most NGOs have or plan to have some form of central data storage about members, recipients and donors. Civil society organisations use these databases to create various documents, from project proposals to donor reports, to statistical illustrations in leaflets and to directories about civic activism. Databases have thus often a value in themselves to NGOs, their maintenance is usually a separate item on the organisation’s budget and occasionally an organisation employed one person just to update the records in the database.<sup>79</sup> Umbrellas in particular presented their databases as the core of their activities and used the number of database entries to demonstrate how well the NGO was tuned in to activities on the ground (Research Notes 01/07 2008).

The interaction between databases- with their columns and blanks- and people directly impacted on the way NGOs’ represented their projects. Database columns illustrate how civic organisations constructed the terms of their own engagement, but blanks in databases show clearly the limit of the social constructivism argument, because they reveal that documents did not entirely define NGO interventions. In this

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79 NANGOF and Project Hope, the two main case studies of the chapter both employed specific employees to administer their database, Project Hope paid a part time employee and NANGOF used a full time intern.

sense databases warrant particular forms of social interaction like NGO reports or leaflets do, but databases are also a highly specific sort of document because they represent social reality as quantifiable and give a quasi-statistical account of civic activism. As Mary Poovey (1998) has argued, quantifiable data has come to be seen as a self evident representation of the world that does not need any interpretation; she shows that it was the formal coherence of statistical accounts, not their analytical value that embodied credibility, based on the belief that the precision of the formal system signalled virtue itself. In a similar way databases' appearance of precision and clear cut categorisation often laid the foundations for claims to credibility of the entire civic sector. As Annelise Riles (1998) has argued, the correct form is most important in NGO documentation and documents constantly swing between their status as concrete objects and as reproducible pattern.

### **The NANGOF Database**

NANGOF created a database of civil society organisations in 2004 based on a felt need to know more about civic activism in Namibia. In July 2008 the database held information about 1111 organisations codified in 187 columns which covered the organisations' contact details, staffing, area of work, funding patterns, beneficiaries, target population and membership status. This organizational data was linked to a table about the organisations' main contact persons, usually the head of the NGO or a permanent volunteer. The NANGOF database is often presented as the core of the umbrella. It has been a major item on NANGOF's budget over the years<sup>80</sup> and the NANGOF employees often cite the high number of listed NGOs as one of the umbrella's core achievements. According to NANGOF's director one of the umbrella's main task is to promote its members using its database (Research Notes 01/07/2008). At the Directors' Forum NGO executives dismissed the government's argument that very little was known about civil society and pointed to the NANGOF database as the most comprehensive collection of data on civic activism in Namibia (Research Notes 27/06/2008).<sup>81</sup>

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80 It was the first item on the new NANGOF Trust's first business plan (2007-9) and still features prominently in the new Business plan for 2009-11 (NANGOF 29 September 2006). This is also true in other organisations. NANASO's business plan 2004-6 lists the expansion of its database as the first item under its programme objectives (NANASO n.d).

81 The dismissal contradicted the Forums' later call for a detailed study of civic activism that should complement NANGOF's database (Research Notes 27/06/2008). See also chapters 4 and 5.

The database is created and frequently used by NANGOF staff who add and delete categories on an ad hoc basis, for very mundane reasons and through uncoordinated everyday practices. Staff could add another category if they felt that an organisation's activity was not properly captured by the existing classifications and they could also merge columns they felt represented the same kind of work. The database's design is therefore not the outcome of one overall master plan but resulted from numerous decentralised manipulations. The specific outlook of the database is important because NANGOF staff uses it to create a host of other documents, from the umbrella's regular reports and newssheets to directories about civil society organizations working in particular sectors and attendance lists for workshops. The secretariat also relies on the database to answer enquires and to decide where to send workshop invitations. As the central location of information about civil society organizations the database structures NANGOF's engagement with its members, and is the main channel for the distribution of opportunities amongst organisations. The NANGOF database is thus an actant in Latour's sense (1996), it forges and forecloses relations between organisations, it holds NANGOF's network together and distributes opportunities by slotting organisation in particular thematic groups. It also creates opportunities for people through the specialised knowledge its software requires. The consultant who set up NANGOF's database also did a similar one for NANASO and because he is so familiar with both he continues to receive job offers to assemble regular reports and directories from them (Research Notes 07/11/2007).

### *Categories: Columns and the limits of social constructivism*

The work with databases requires specialist knowledge not least because its language is highly idiosyncratic and column headings need to be decoded before they can be understood by outsiders. Columns therefore create rules of inclusion and exclusion among NGO staff by dividing those who understand the jargon and those who cannot make sense of all the acronyms. It took me several months to decipher all abbreviations, some of which were only used in civil society like SWG, FBOs, CBOs - and not until the second half of my stay did I learn PLWHA, RACOC and

CACOC.<sup>82</sup> Some organisations were only called by their acronym and it was not always clear what the abbreviation stood for.<sup>83</sup> Similarly the database employed its own shorthand in column headings and the user needed to have considerable background knowledge to navigate the records. Deciphering acronyms was thus an ongoing interaction between the database and its users. An initial comprehensive decoding was necessary even for the most basic work with the database like entering, reading or manipulating data, and this decoding shaped further interaction. The NANGOF staff reproduced the same acronyms they found initially so difficult to decipher and, commenting on a particular obscure text, the executive director said that “we in Namibia, we like acronyms” (Research Notes 02/06/2008).

The database allocates opportunities and sets up networks, but it also shapes how civic activism is perceived. Its design gives a powerful image of civil society activism as a series of discrete events that can be neatly slotted into columns. These columns can subsequently be linked back together in different ways by querying the database, which made the data output highly specific - if the query did not include the exact category under which an NGO activity was catalogued, the organisation would not appear in the output. The database made it therefore possible to enter ever more detailed information about organisations without acknowledging that the classification itself was a highly specific segmentation of the world (Bowker/ Star 1999: 10, 24).

There is nothing natural about NANGOF's separation of civic activism into eight sectors, and the division was occasionally questioned by members. At several sector working group meetings people complained that their work would fit into more than one category but they could not attend all meetings and would like to be informed about other meetings to see whether these sectors fit their own interest (Research Notes 01/07/2008). NANGOF's chairperson himself admitted that the umbrella needed an internal discussion whether the SWG topics still represented the major concerns of civil society.<sup>84</sup>

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82 The (over)use of acronyms is certainly not specific to civil society, and academia produces at least as many specialised abbreviations. See Brubaker 1999.

83 Few people knew the full title of NACSO or NANASO and even words with meaning could be remade into acronym like the Basic Income Grant (BIG) and the PEACE Centre (People's Education Assistance, Counselling for Empowerment). On this point see also Riles 2000: 123.

84 Interview Chairman of the NANGOF Board of Trustees/NANGOF, Windhoek 10/06/2008.

<b>Field</b>	<b>✓ if covered</b>
Adult Literacy	
Agriculture	
Animal husbandry	
Appropriate Technologies	
Career guidance	
Child care	
Civil society development	
Community Development	
Community Planning	
Conservancy Development and management	
Cultural heritage	
Early Childhood Development	
Education	
Education - Special Needs	
Elderly	
Emergency Response	
Employment creation	
Energy and energy conservation	
Environment and conservation	
Food Relief	
Gender	
Good Governance & Democracy	
Health - Mother & Child	
Health - Traditional	
Health Care - Primary	
Health Care - Secondary	
HIV/AIDS	
Housing	
Human Rights	
Information Technology	
Land Reform & Resettlement	
Marketing	
Media and communication	
Natural resource management	
Organisational Development	
Population	
Roads	
Rural Development	
Savings & Credit	
Settlement Upgrading	
SME Development	
Transportation	
Urban Development	
Vocational and Skills Training	
Water and sanitation	
Youth	
Other (specify)	

*Figure 2: NANGOF Database “NGO Activity” Fields*

Discussion around the usefulness of SWG topics and other categories in the database shows that the current classification system did not necessarily reflect the main concerns of organizations. The umbrella had created those labels and subsequently tried to fit all NGOs into them. The classification allowed organizations to be in multiple categories, but NANGOF had difficulty in accommodating NGOs that did not fit into any of its given categories. When an NGO called “Forum for the Future of Africa” applied for membership at NANGOF and proved that it fulfilled all necessary requirements, the umbrella could not approve of the application because the NGO worked on a regional level and NANGOF did not have a category for this in its database. The application was left pending until staff at the secretariat found time to create the category (Research Notes 02/07/2008).

NANGOF’s categories were the result of a conscious decision how to carve up reality (Bowker/Star 1999) which created the terms of the umbrella’s own engagement. Although members occasionally challenged the exact meanings of the categories, they did not question the basic assumption that discrete categories represented fundamental differences in NGOs’ work. The umbrella’s ability to present its categories as more or less reflecting reality ‘out there’ points to its power to convince people to accept one particular discourse as natural and obfuscate alternative narratives (Foucault 1980; Latour 2000). As Ian Hacking (1999) points out, social construction is a useful analytical tool to question the ostensible inevitability of categories and to show who is in a position to authoritatively establish distinctions and how those thus classified adhere to or challenge the particular categorisation.

The explanatory vigour of the power/knowledge nexus and the social construction of reality has made this analysis the dominant way to think about concepts and categories (Bowker/Star 1999; Lau 2008). However convincing the idea of social construction and its embedded nexus between power and knowledge is, Ian Hacking (1999) rightfully warns against an overuse of the concept.<sup>85</sup> According to him if everything is socially constructed, the concept ceases to be analytically helpful. Instead it should be explained what exactly is constructed and how social construction links ideas, people and various social practices and institutions, in order to see the

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85 See also Mosse/Lewis 2006.

limits of social construction's explanatory vigour. There is an ongoing discussion in the literature exactly to what extent social construction makes up reality. Extreme constructivists would claim that reality is purely a result of the dominant discourse and could be very different if other power/knowledge relations prevailed (Pickering 2006). However if categories of civic activism are purely the results of power relations and could have been completely different, it is hard to explain why no single categorisation seems to completely match activists' accounts of their projects. People in civil society often modified the meaning of categories in their everyday use. They might apply categorisations in a comparative rather than absolute manner or disagree with the classification altogether.

The gap between categories and activists' accounts of their projects indicates that people could step outside of the classificatory logic of the database when they talked about specific activities. When NANGOF surveyed donors on funding for civil society, the questionnaire asked them to tick particular boxes according to their funding priorities. However, the interview often turned out to be a long discussion about the links between different programmes, because respondents stressed that their projects could not be broken down into discrete categories and it was impossible for them to talk about one part without mentioning others. Respondents acknowledged that project areas were all interconnected but argued at the same time that civic activism could be divided up into different categories that made "coordination" easier.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> See the next chapter on the specific meaning of coordination as division rather than cooperation.

## Funding patterns

Environment		Education		Gender		Soc/ec justice	
Energy cons		Early childhood dev					
CBNRM		Schools (equipment)					
Land reform							

Health		HR/ Democracy		Development		Training/ Capac Bld	
Mother&child		Good governance		Employment creation		vocational	
Trad healthc		Legal assistance		Food relief		Project management	
Primary care		justice		Housing		Fundrasing	
Second. care		HR		ICT		financial	
<b>HIV</b>		media		infrastructure		other	
Condoms		youth		Water&sanitation			
Counselling				Rural development			
PLWHA				Urban development			
HB care				Savings&Credit			
OVC							
Workplace							

Figure 3: NANGOF Donor questionnaire (excerpt)

Activists did not necessarily believe that any classification represented a “natural” order, but created and applied categories in a comparative instead of absolute manner. Their conscious manipulation of categories differs from dominant arguments in the literature about the ways in which classification shapes our conduct by representing a particularistic view as natural. Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Star (1999:10) argued that classification is a spatio-temporal segmentation of the world that substitutes ethical questions about content with ever more formal detail. Their analysis of the International Classification of Diseases shows that the Index foreclosed any substantial debate about health and illness by labelling non-fitting cases like witchcraft as non-existing disease. They thus demonstrated how classification could represent a particular definition of health and illness as natural and at the same time concealed the process of how categories were made. Bowker and



Star concluded that categories are such a powerful representation of the world because we are hardly aware of their work in shaping our conduct. In their analysis, classifications are based on multiple decentralised practices of categorisation that steer our conduct, manipulate our needs and manage our behaviour. People are hardly aware of how this system shapes the conduct of conduct (Dean 1999:2-3) and if they do recognise this influence they are only left with the choice of using it for their own ends or resisting it.<sup>87</sup> Irrespective of whether people use systems of governmentality for domination or resistance they fundamentally believe in it and act within its overall framework.

In contrast NANGOF staff was well aware that their categorisation of civic activism was subject to negotiation and constant change. They did detach themselves from the classificatory framework by consciously adding or deleting categories according to context. In their interaction with the database, staff adjusted categories to indicate tendencies in relations to other categories, e.g. an organisation worked more on HIV than on gender issues, an activist had more knowledge about training than about ICTs or a specific donor funded saving schemes rather than employment creation projects.<sup>88</sup> The comparative nature of categories also explains how an NGO could move from one category to another depending on the predominant perception of its work. There was considerable confusion within the NANGOF Board whether the director of the “The Rainbow Project” was the representative for the gender or for the human rights sector. The Rainbow Project had traditionally advocated for the civil rights of people in same sex relationships and was thus categorised as human rights organisation, but it has recently focused on service delivery to sexual minorities and had thus been reclassified as working on gender issues.

The literature on social construction has helped to render agency behind categories visible but this does not mean that powerful agents could steer the entire process (Schneider/Ingram 1993). Very often particular views became prominent as a

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87 Arjun Appadurai (2001) describes how a group of civic organisations in Mumbai used survey methods to produce their own representation of slums. Despite his celebratory appraisal of this “democracy from below” he represents slum dwellers’ “resistance” as still being trapped in the logic of surveys and census taking instead of challenging the overall idea of categorizing the “poor”.

88 Donald Brenneis (2006) makes a similar point about the relative categories in academic evaluation forms.

result of multiple processes which were only partly influenced by distinct individuals. Most categories of the NANGOF database were either informally adopted from members or were created by the NANGOF secretariat along the way. Any member of staff could add columns to the database whenever they felt that a particular activity was not covered. When NANGOF planned to set up a directory of all local donors the special programmes section at the Ministry of Health contributed money to publish the information about funding for AIDS service organisations. The information this part of the directory required was much more detailed than the NANGOF database provided. The database only had a column for “HIV” as a subcategory of health, but the ministry asked to distinguish between funding for projects on HIV counselling, condom distribution, home based care, workplace programmes and projects for people living with HIV and OVCs. In the course of data collection and processing, the NANGOF database’s section on HIV grew exceptionally as ever more columns were created to accommodate the detailed information required for the directory. This resulted in a considerable imbalance between the specificity possible for HIV programmes vis-à-vis the rather crude categorization in other sectors like environment or social justice. Although ever more NGO projects include AIDS related services the expansion of the database’s HIV section was not a result of this increased concern in civic activism but a side effect of donor priorities and a specific data gathering project. The example shows that classifications are not a straightforward representation of organisational activity and only a combination of multiple factors explains which categories are chosen and how detailed a classification will be.<sup>89</sup>

The meaning of categories was often the result of a repeated shuffling of documents and the constant reproduction of form (Riles 1998) and content in the process. The specific meaning of the database’s “capacity building” category has been produced by constant repetition of the view that NGOs only have a limited knowledge of funding requirements and relevant policies and therefore lack an adequate overview of the context of their own engagement. NANGOF used similar phrases to describe the “lack of capacity in civil society” in its annual report 1997/8, on its website written in 2004, in its introduction to the civil society management

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89 According to Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Star (1999: 323) there is no simple prediction from how a given set of alliances or tensions leads to a classification.

qualification 2006 and in its 2007 publication spotlight on training.<sup>90</sup> The example also shows how documents link the different elements of an organisation over time and thus craft an institutional perspective (Harper 1998: 46). Statements cease to be ascribable to one particular author and come to be used by the entire organisation. Civil society's lack of capacity has been a prominent topic in many publications of other NGOs and the opinion is widely shared within the sector.<sup>91</sup> What "capacity building" meant for civil society organisations was therefore a product of the term's "career" and the frequent repetitions of phrases across documents,<sup>92</sup> instead of just a (thinly veiled) attempt of the umbrella to survey and steer civic activism.

In sum documents play an important role in the multiple processes that contribute to the social construction of categories. But how do these processes interact in a concrete case? The next section shows that classification is a structured process that is influenced by the materiality and the internal logic of construction. It thus supports George Lakoff's (1987) argument that there is something inherent in concepts that makes them more or less convincing. Concepts are shaped by the materiality of their object, Hacking's "what" (Hacking 2000), the structure of the concepts, their *Gestalt*, and by the entity doing the thinking, its body and its relations with its environment. As George Lakoff explained, a concept's *Gestalt* is the set of interrelated assumptions that underlie its definition. In his case study the popular concept of anger as heat and pressure does not only constitute a coherent system of linked assumptions about anger, it also directly connects with the bodily experience of people. As the next section will show, civil society's concepts of 'orphans' included a coherent set of related assumptions about orphans as being vulnerable and in need of

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90 The 1997/8 report notes "Limited capacity within (...)civil society organisations in terms of skills, funds, experience and time; Little focus on proper program design, prioritising of activities and implementation strategies. Limited access to information that causes difficulty in co-ordination of activities (...) No well co-ordinated advocacy and lobbying campaign." The opinion is repeated as "CSOs are insufficiently aware of policy components and miss the opportunity to actively participate both in the formulation of strategies and the implementation of such strategies" in a funding proposal 2004 (NANGOF 27 June 2004:2) which results in the view that "capacity building within specific organisations will strengthen them to carry out their programmes more effectively and to implement development programmes more efficiently" on the old NANGOF website ([www.nangof.org.na](http://www.nangof.org.na) last accessed 11/08/2008) .

91 The opinion was repeated by NGO directors and voiced in various meetings and project descriptions (Interview Chairman of the NANGOF Board of Trustees/NANGOF 10/06/2008; NID website <http://www.nid.org.na/CSSP.htm> (last accessed 11/08/2008); idasa n.d.).

92 Annelise Riles (2000: 78) talks about the patterning of documents, but she refers to the constant reproduction of documents' form, not their content

help. The concept was also fundamentally connected to the self image and asserted roles of those organisations that came up with the definition.

### *The making of OVCs in Namibia*

One column in the NANGOF database indicates whether an NGO works with “Orphans and Vulnerable Children” (OVC’s).<sup>93</sup> This section looks at how this category was constructed, i.e. at the interactions between the idea, the people thus labelled and the institutions and practices linking the two (Hacking 2000). In 2002 a joint workshop of government, donors, AIDS service organisations and NGOs working with children (MoHSS 2002) defined who was an “OVC” in Namibia. The OVC definition adopted after two days of discussion was: “An OVC in Namibia is a child under the age of 18 whose mother, father or both parents or primary caregiver has died, and/or who is in need of care and protection.” (MoHSS 2002: 54)

Who was an “orphaned and vulnerable child” was thus the product of a specific conference debate. The definition makes clear that an OVC did not necessarily have to be without parents or a caregiver. Most OVC programmes in fact supported primary caregivers of the children and thus shifted the emphasis in practice to the second part of the definition, the “need of care and protection”. This “need to care and protect” provided external actors like NGOs, governmental agencies and donors with the mandate to act on behalf of the child. The GRN passed a national policy on OVCs in 2004 and set up an OVC national steering committee to administer the new national OVC Trust Fund, UNESCO hosted one of its bi-annual consultations on OVCs in Namibia in 2005 and USAID commissioned a data collection on OVCs in the same year (USAID 2005). These policies, institutions and data gathering projects were designed to monitor and streamline OVC programmes. One delegate at the national conference on OVC summed up their rationale:

I believe it is also important to have records or information emanating from the ground on how communities are dealing with OVC (sic). We are missing this crucial information in Namibia. At grassroots level people have started working with the OVC issue but their work

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93 The OVC category is chosen because it provides a particularly illuminating example of what happened if categories were fundamentally at odds with the social context they were supposed to describe.

is not being recorded anywhere and we do not know what they are doing. This information would help us to come up with appropriate inputs.<sup>94</sup>

The institutionalised character of “OVCs” became especially apparent in a debate about the “OVC trademark” in Namibia. The same conference that had earlier on adopted the official OVC definition also decided on a single logo for all projects working with OVCs in the country.<sup>95</sup> The trademark discussion indicated that attendees were very well aware that the specific definition of “OVCs” was negotiated. However the discussion also indicated that participants were convinced that the OVC label was based on ‘reality out there’, because the discussion revolved around particular wording and did not question the overall assumption that OVCs existed.<sup>96</sup>

The process of defining OVCs illustrates some of the theoretical points made earlier. It shows that the crafting of categories reveals who is in a position to determine the terms of social engagement. It was a panel of expert delegates at a conference who defined what it meant to be an orphaned and vulnerable child in Namibia. The definition had serious material consequences for the people thus labelled. The government adopted the definition in its national policy on OVCs<sup>97</sup> which set the criteria for a person’s eligibility to state support, access to the special OVC Trust Fund and inclusion in international aid programmes like the World Food Programme’s food relief for OVCs (GRN 2006). The conference resolution also delineated the space for those working with OVCs by defining the best care and set the standards for OVC programmes (MoHSS 2002: 62ff).

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94 MoHSS 2002: 51

95 “The old logo was abandoned because delegates found that a more corporate and professional-looking logo would be more appropriate. It was decided that the new logo should function as the ‘trademark’ for all written materials or activities having to do with OVC in Namibia.” (MoHSS 2002: 5). This was a clear effort of civil society to brand its activities and create a corporate identity around the OVC activism. See chapter 7 for a more detailed argument about branding activism.

96 Annelise Riles 2006: 8 showed that discussions of documents revolved around formalities and specific wording instead of addressing substantial questions.

97 GRN 2005.

## **Cataloguing OVCs: The Project Hope survey**

The basic definition of an OVC was not as straightforward as it seemed and required a number of additional assumptions to be useful for NGOs in practice. One of the key points was to decide exactly who was “in need of protection” and how this need could be measured. This section illustrates how one NGO, Project Hope (Namibia), has conceptualised “OVCs” in its work. It shows how the organisation had to use numerous sub-categories in order to define and “measure” the vulnerability of OVCs, including decisions what was an adequate level of food, shelter, and psychological support below which a child became an OVC. It illustrates Georg Lakoff’s (1984) argument that categories are shaped by their Gestalt, the systematic way to think about the category, and how the Gestalt prescribed the kind of information the NGO had to collect about the children to design its programmes and to make them legible for its donors. This section shows that the complexity of the underlying assumptions becomes particularly visible if those presuppositions do not match the respondents’ perceptions of their own needs.

Project HOPE (Health Opportunities for People Everywhere) is an international aid agency with its headquarters in Washington DC. The NGO primarily runs health education programmes with a special focus on Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS awareness. In Namibia it has established a microfinance programme which provides interest free small loans to carers of OVCs, in order to enable them to start income generating activities. The NGO closely monitors its beneficiaries’ progress through bi-weekly compulsory business meetings and health education classes. Project Hope Namibia started its so-called “Village Health Bank” (VHB) programme in the densely populated Oshana and Omusati regions of the north of the country and has recently expanded the project to Ohangwena and Oshikoto.



Indicator	APR07 Results (Oct.06- Sep.07)	COP07 Targets (Oct.07- Sep.08)	FY08.Q1 Results (Oct.07- Dec.07)	FY08.Q2 Results (Jan.08- Mar.08)	FY08. SAPR Results (Oct.07- Mar.08)	FY08. SAPR Results / COP07 Targets	Explanation needed?	Explanation if SAPR Result < 40% or > 60% of COP07 Target
	copy from FY08.Q1 report	copy from FY08.Q1 report	copy from FY08.Q1 report	compile from your source documents	adjust for overlap between Q1 & Q2	= I / F	are you on track with your COP07 target? If not, explain in column L	write explanation here

# OVC served by Supplemental Direct Support (subset of indicator 8.1)	5341	4280	6610	6546	6610	154.4%	Please explain why you seem considerably ahead of schedule in achieving your COP07 target	6610 is the cumulative number of OVC that are receiving economic strengthening support through their care givers since project started in april 2005
# of OVC who received food & nutritional supplementation			217	27	244	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	
# of OVC who received shelter & care			201	50	251	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	
# of OVC who received protection			13	12	25	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	
# of OVC who received health care			71	78	149	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	
# of OVC who received psychosocial support						#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	
# of OVC who received education & vocational training				4	4	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	
# of OVC who received economic strengthening			6108	6375	6375	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	

Figure 5: PEPFAR Feedback Report for PH; Key: SAPR: semi-annual programme results, APR annual programme results; COP

Country Operational Plan



The first round of data was collected between January 2005 and March 2006. The long time span of the data gathering indicates how difficult it was for interviewers to reach all respondents. They had to travel long distances to administer a questionnaire that asked about the carer's education, about housing, assets, food sufficiency measured in number of meals per day, household income and risk, HIV, links with the community, children's psychological support and views on children's rights. Risk was measured through the regularity and reliability of remittances, the links with the community were determined through the period of settlement, attendance of meetings and the level of mutual help; questions such as whether children talked to adults about their problems, had a memory book and attended religious services were to measure the psychological support available to children. The interviews were conducted with caregivers, because they were the primary target of the health bank programme and because Project Hope assumed it would be easier to track them over the five years programme period than children who frequently moved between households.

The 1601 interviews of the first round showed major blanks, information regarding the caregivers' date of birth, civil status, major form of food preparation and sources of income, although Project Hope staff had thought these as straightforward questions.<sup>99</sup> Data in the "community coherence" and "psychological support" domains were even patchier. The information about attendance at "meetings to address community concerns" (222 out of 1601 answers missing); items stolen (224 blanks) and existence of support groups (203 blanks) was especially inconsistent. This was particularly problematic in a questionnaire that was designed to have no blanks at all.

Reacting to the problems, Project Hope staff re-designed and shortened the questionnaire considerably and initiated a "recollection" (repeated survey) round to assemble a smaller but more coherent data set. The recollection survey from February 2006 until February 2007 included only 495 interviews and contained only half of the original categories. It was decided to cut down on the number of questions to make

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<sup>99</sup> Research Notes Programme Officer/ Project Hope 19/06/2008.

the questionnaire more manageable and because quite a few questions were thought to be inappropriate for later comparisons. As the recollection got underway the interviewers soon found out that the initial problems were aggravated by the fact that people were difficult to trace as they used different names and often the number of children in households had changed. It was thus particularly difficult to re-visit original respondents and match data from the first and second collection rounds. If it was hard to obtain reliable data about caregivers this was even more the case for OVCs. The database has a small section with data about particular children taken from the records of community health visitors who monitored children's growth between April and October 2007. However the database only holds records of 67 children and all children are identified with their name, which has proven to create problems in tracking down children for follow-ups as they frequently move between households and are often known by different names.<sup>100</sup>

The gaps in the data could not be resolved by the staff in Windhoek because the data collection and entry was done by two different people outside the capital. By the time the staff in Windhoek saw the data it had become completely impossible to trace respondents and Project Hope staff anticipated that the problems would increase once the second survey round was due, to measure change in beneficiaries' living standards. The blanks in the data were problematic because the organisation could not maintain close contact with its beneficiaries and the survey was the only way for Project Hope to know whether its programme had an impact.

As it became apparent that recollecting the data would not close the gaps and was unlikely to produce data that was sufficiently sound to meet donor requirements, the Namibian branch contacted Project Hope's headquarters and asked for help. Washington sent a database expert to help redesigning the questionnaire and PEPFAR granted the NGO a three months extension on their feedback deadline to "clean up" the data and provide the detailed explanation required.<sup>101</sup> Work on the new questionnaire started during my last days in Windhoek with particular attention given to possibilities how to track people, adapt the wording and include pictures to make

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100 Research Notes Programme Officer/ Project Hope 19/06/2008.

101 See the PEPFAR feedback form above.

the questionnaire clearer. Project Hope staff decided to prioritise questions about the training of VHB members, because the report for the headquarters was due earlier than the donor reports.

### *Blanks*

The main purpose of the cleanup was to avoid the blanks the first survey had generated. For Project Hope staff the blanks were a source of embarrassment and an obstacle to the smooth running of projects which could be remedied by technicalities, i.e. rephrasing of question and reducing the length of the questionnaire. Gaps occurred in the initial data because people either did not answer the question or gave answers the interviewers did not record because they regarded them as irrelevant and/or not matching the questionnaire's categories.<sup>102</sup> Discussions about how to change the questionnaire and avoid gaps in the future show that Project Hope staff in Windhoek and Washington thought that the blanks were a clear sign that people did not understand the questions properly. The idea was that blanks could be filled within the logical framework of the database by rephrasing the questions. That was the reason why the only solution Project Hope's headquarters could think of was to send a database expert from overseas.

However, the database's categories were based on a number of tacit and highly specific assumptions and the blanks might point to a fundamental difference between the questions and what people could and wanted to answer, a difference that cannot be reduced to improper wording. The blanks in Project Hope's database are therefore as interesting as the completed columns (Reed 2006) and an enquiry into the reasons behind the blanks leads to deeper insights into how concepts take shape. As mentioned earlier blanks occurred above all in questions about the sources and level of income, about community coherence and psycho-social support. They were particularly difficult to redress because incomplete data on ID numbers and conflicting answers regarding names and their "village health bank" codes made it difficult to track people. Difficulties in tracking people point to the problematic gap

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102 Research Notes Programme Officer/ Project Hope 19/06/2008.

between a survey that relied on one fixed identity marker for respondents and the flexibility of people's identities that changed according to context.

Some questions were arguably the direct result of reporting requirements. The questionnaire's main domains of shelter, nutrition, health, education and psychosocial support were all directly taken from the PEPFAR feedback form. The psychosocial support domain included a question whether the child attended religious services, which was as much evidence of PEPRAR's Christian undertones as related to the considerable influence of the church in northern Namibia (McKittrick 2002 Hangula 1998). The blanks thus indicate that the survey was as much about Project Hope's feedback requirements as it was about the social context it tried to describe. Other blanks show that categories were based on a number of problematic assumptions and depicted concepts that were difficult to measure. Particularly often, blanks occurred in relation to questions that measured respondents' "vulnerability", like household income, community coherence and psycho-social support. Closer attention to these blanks shows how the survey crafted a specific understanding of "vulnerability" which made it difficult for respondents to answer its questions.<sup>103</sup>

Being "vulnerable", however defined, had far-reaching implications for people as the single most important criterion to become eligible for various support funds, from the government's OVC Trust fund to food relief provided by UNESCO and micro-credits administered by NGOs like Project Hope. Answers about (concrete) levels of income and food security had thus consequences for both sides. For the caregivers the "wrong" answers might compromise the level of support they received. For the NGO, insufficient numbers of eligible people questioned the rationale for its project because vulnerability created the "powerless" the NGO needed to justify its intervention. As Barbara Cruikshank (1999:70-72) has argued "empowerment"

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103 Contrasting the NGO's concept with "local understandings" or "local perspectives" risks to repeat the mistake of postcolonial theory by presenting only one side (the "West" or the NGO in this context) as ethical agents capable of making fundamentally wrong moral decisions, whereas the "others" (non Western people or project beneficiaries) are locked in their locality which reduces their behaviour to expression of the social context instead of seeing it as outcome of autonomous (moral) decisions (Zizek 2008:11).

projects create the class of the ‘powerless people’ as targets of and justifications for interventions by the “empowering” side.<sup>104</sup>

Blanks did not only point to the strategic function of “vulnerability”, they also provided an opportunity to think about the exact meaning of “vulnerable children”.<sup>105</sup>

The “OVC” concept in the Project Hope survey was shaped by the ‘materiality’ of the ‘objects’, by the concept’s Gestalt and by the body doing the thinking. The concrete “material” of the concept were the non-biological children in the caregivers’ households whose presence provided the first criteria for Project Hope to identify potential Village Health Bank beneficiaries,<sup>106</sup> the *Gestalt* of the OVC concept was visible in the numerous questions to determine the standard of living, which were all thought to be related to the meaning of “vulnerability”. In this definition vulnerable children had insufficient food and shelter, were likely to drop out of school early and were left without the necessary psycho-social support to cope with parental loss and other grievances. The concept’s Gestalt was therefore closely linked to a number of assumptions about the experience of these children which dictated the design of the questionnaire and generated a particular knowledge about the beneficiaries. For instance the survey redefined any child not living in his/her parental household as potentially vulnerable and ignored the common practice of moving children between households of extended families.<sup>107</sup> It also assumed that foster children were automatically disadvantaged in comparison to biological children, because the NGO assumed that they were more likely to receive a lower education, were given more chores in the household and had fewer personal possessions than biological children.

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104 The survey did not only create the group of powerless, it also defined the means of empowerment by asking about community meetings as prime tool to empower people. As noted above the question was often not answered, indicating that respondents had very little to say about Project Hope’s prime tool for empowerment.

105 See Stephen Devereux (2006) for a definition of vulnerability in social protection programmes in other southern African countries.

106 However this criterion is highly problematic because child fostering is such a common practice in northern Namibia. It shows that from the three Lakoffian elements of concepts the “materiality of the object” is the most problematic, because there is hardly a straightforward link between this “materiality” and the concept.

107 See Urassa et al 2004 for fostering in Tanzania. Renee Pennington (1991) lists various reasons why parents in southern Africa foster out their children and shows that parental death only explains a minority of foster cases.

The assumption that foster children are automatically disadvantaged is contested in the literature about foster care in Africa.<sup>108</sup> Non-attendance of school is a problematic indicator of disadvantage because orphaned children tend to be older and therefore likely to be beyond schooling age (Nyamukapa et al 2003). Equating orphans with vulnerability focuses on parental loss as the only factor to determine the children's social status and neglects other aspects like gender, class, location and relations to the head of household (Nyamukapa et al 2003). Lastly the questionnaire evaluated the "vulnerability" of children based on tacit assumptions about a "proper" childhood indicated through a list of essential items every child needed. The survey asked whether the child had at least two sets of clothes, one pair of shoes, a memory book, a mosquito net and a shared sleeping mattress. The questionnaire instructed the interviewer to observe whether those items were present rather than just asking the caregivers. Questionnaire imperatives like observability did thus influence which questions were chosen to measure overall concepts. However, it remains doubtful whether personal possessions are the best indicators to evaluate deprivation in the context of rural poverty where most items were shared. Presenting a specific group of people as being at risk justifies outside intervention to achieve observable improvements. Risk anxiety thus provided the rationale for child supervision by adults (Scott et al 1998) and caregivers' supervision by the NGO – Project Hope's bi-weekly meetings were designed to train caregivers but also to check on the beneficiaries' "progress" in health understanding and child psychology. Accordingly the Project Hope database had a column for workshop facilitators' evaluations in how far attendees' understanding of child health and psychology progressed.

The questionnaire illustrated how specific the notion of vulnerability in the OVC definition was and what huge conceptual baggage the category carried. It is difficult to determine how far the specific notion of an OVC was in line with the perceptions of caregivers, let alone much deeper questions about different

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108 See Urassa et al; Zimmerman 2003 vs. Wadell/Brown 1997. The latter article is an account of fostering amongst Oshivambo speakers, Project Hope's main beneficiaries. It confirms that foster children receive lower education than biological children but does not find any difference between orphaned and non-orphaned foster children. Although the literature does not allow for a final conclusion about the status of foster children, it makes clear that orphanhood does not automatically result in increased vulnerability.

understandings of childhood and adequate childrearing.<sup>109</sup> However, the NGO did not anticipate conceptual disagreements or did not regard them as decisive for the data collection. The project was designed by Project Hope's headquarters for Namibia and Mozambique without the input of (potential) beneficiaries. The project's understanding of an OVC was an outcome of the ongoing conversation between policy makers, donors and caring NGOs from which caregivers and children were conspicuously absent. And even after the survey encountered serious problems, the NGO did not consult the beneficiaries or re-evaluate basic concepts, but presented the setbacks as problems of translation.

Project Hope's concept of vulnerability shows that blanks may point to a fundamental mismatch between categories and experiences. However, blanks occur in databases for much simpler reasons. This is especially true for blanks in data that seemed to be "easy" to collect. NANGOF's database has many gaps in "straightforward" categories like members' contact details, staff profiles and where NGOs work. This data, though quick to gather for a small data set, took up an extraordinary amount of work-time as the database grew. In July 2008 NANGOF's database listed 1127 organisations and it would be a full time job to update even the basic information for all of them, plus the listed 1554 contact people. One intern at NANGOF spent three months updating the contact people list (Research Notes 08/05/2008) and estimates were that by the time she had completed the organisations' list she could start again with phoning organisations as their contact information would be outdated by then. Establishing and maintaining databases is very labour intensive. The NANGOF database was created as specific consultancy and the umbrella's current and next business plans both list maintaining and extending the database as one of the first priorities.

## **Blank Consequences**

The last section showed that there could be multiple reasons why blanks in databases occurred. Blanks might point to fundamental conceptual problems or be 'just' the result of an organisation's lack of staff to keep the records up to date and fill

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109 For the social construction of childhood in Europe see James 2004, Uprichard 2008.

all the gaps. Whatever the reasons for blanks, gaps structured users' engagement with the data by directing their attention to particular information while downplaying other facts (Heimer 2006). Directing attention to specific fields had a direct impact on inter-organisational relations. When the three capacity building officers started at NANGOF one of their first tasks was to invite NGOs to the umbrella's sector working group meetings. Since all three employees were either new or returning to NANGOF after a long break, they all relied on the database to decide which organisations to invite and how to group them together. They designed queries to find suitable NGOs for the different working groups - queries they subsequently used to distribute information, forward invitations and calls for proposals. These queries only worked with clear cut definitions and did not allow for ambiguous data like brackets or question marks, neither did they recognise gradual distinctions indicating specific priorities in NGO work. Queries turned blanks and bracketed ticks into statements about value, a tick was a value in the column, a blank was negligible. Queries thus decided about inclusion and exclusion of organisations in networks and distributed opportunities amongst NGOs. Moreover the database created a distinct picture of what civic activism was all about. The comparably detailed differentiation of the HIV sector made NGOs' activities appear more nuanced than civic activism in socio-economic justice, which just had one column for all activities. Although the database should ideally have been expanded every time an NGO activity was not covered, in practice the information was not entered and there was often no indication which area the NGO worked in. Organisations that worked in new fields therefore hardly featured in any query. The database's bias towards well established areas of work became especially apparent in publications like directories or handbooks about civil society which made an authoritative claim to represent civic activism.<sup>110</sup> All vagueness, ambiguities and nuances that had been still present in the database were completely removed from the published accounts, tendencies could not be shown and emphasises on specific topics were lost. With their unambiguous picture of civic activism publications did not only present an account of what civic activism was about, but

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110 See for instance the claim of the "Namibian Network of AIDS Service organisations" that 'NANASO (...) seeks to be in contact with any civil society organisation that is active in the field of HIV/AIDS (...) its contact range is (...) spread right across the country and NANASO is succeeding in achieving a full national coverage as a network organisation.' (NANASO website [www.nanaso.com.na](http://www.nanaso.com.na) last accessed 10/08/2008).



also what NGOs ought to be working on. Their lists appeared to be complete and there was no indication of activism outside their register. If an organisation's work did not fit any of the categories it was, it seemed, because the project was irrelevant. Directories were not only interesting with regard to what they presented as civic activism, but also how they presented it and how much (more) time and attention activists dedicated to the directories' formalities compared to their content. Activists assumed that the content was already there, at hand in the database and what needed discussion was how to present it. As the next section shows, formatting issues were thus the main point of contestation across various drafts of the documents.

### *Formatting Activism: Points, brackets, headings and tables*

The discussion of categories illustrated the analytical strength of seeing civic activism as socially constructed. However, the strength of the power/knowledge assumption and the argument for social construction has presented documents in a highly specific, i.e. mundanely strategic way (Reed 2006). Acknowledging that documents can be more than just tools to achieve set goals requires a closer attention to the aesthetic dimensions of a document and its status as artefact. Annelise Riles recounts how she started to give more attention to formatting than to contents of documents after she had started to work with NGOs in Fiji (Riles 2006:8) and I had a similar experience during my time at NANGOF. I was commissioned to collect the data for and compile a directory of funding agencies in Namibia. After the data collection was complete the project took another three months to finish because the NANGOF's principal client was not satisfied with the formatting and a lengthy debate about the order and space of columns, the outlook of pages and the brackets around ticks followed.

The discussion seemed to indicate that what was most important was that funding booklet had the same design as previous directories. Formatting comments were justified by a supposedly greater ease to use, but tables are a highly particular way to represent civic activism no matter whether they list donors in an alphabetical order or not. The later work on the funding directory thus confirmed Riles' point that the intention in document drafting is to produce an object that fits the correct format

(1998: 386). The evaluation criterion is the replication of one specific format across drafts and what disappears from agents' view is the document's value as text. (Riles 2000: 78-80).

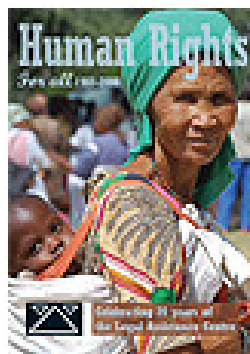
This considerable attention to formalities and the ordered appearance of tables represents more than a slightly odd focus on formalities. The underlying idea suggested that the orderly image of the directory was the truthful representation of a neatly organised civic activism. The directory's design suggested that every NGO work could be summed up in two sentences, and all possible kinds of projects corresponded to a tick in the table. It was possible for the organisation to work in more than one area, but every activity neatly fitted into one particular category without fuzzy boundaries. There were no projects that did not match at least one of the categories. The tables were usually supplemented by a list of keys explaining the use of brackets, letters and symbols. The keys and the booklets' short introductions (NANGOF May 2008: 15) were the most obvious examples how documents instructed their readers how to use them (Harper 1998: 45), but documents also contained more indirect tools like boxes, graphs and headings to highlight particular information and make other parts seem less important.

Debates around formatting were therefore not simply small-minded contestations around font sizes, but they forged one unified opinion about what was important in civil society and thus worth highlighting. People held divergent views on what was most important in civic activism and what should therefore appear at the top of tables. However those differences were eliminated from the final product through multiple formatting rounds (Harper 1998). The editing of the funding directory erased the links between funding programmes which interviewees had found so important and presented funding as a series of discrete programmes corresponding to particular ticks in the tables. It also added columns that had not previously been discussed like "prevention of mother-to-child-transmission" as a project area or the "general population" as target group. The final directory did therefore not represent what respondents actually said and found important, but mirrored what NANGOF's funding agency found worth adding or deleting (Research Notes 04/03/2008). The formatting changed the character of the funding directory considerably, turning it from a document of respondents' views into an institutional account without a clearly

identifiable author. The various stages of the directory therefore illuminate how a document as an “object in process” (Domanska 2006: 181) changed its character and social relations changed depending on the state of its development and the overall context.<sup>111</sup>

The finishing editing usually contained a decision which pictures to include in the final report. Images in reports, directories and leaflets were especially interesting as they conveyed a meaning not explicitly mentioned by the text and were a subtle way of emphasising particular information and conveying a certain image of the organisation. As the next section shows, images were a particular good illustration that documents enabled particular forms of interaction with them and foreclosed others. Images directed readers attention to specific aspects and could manipulate understanding of NGO activism in ways that could not be justified in the written text as the next section will argue.

## Images



Legal Assistance Centre : Human Rights for All

Most images in civil society documents represented either areas of NGO intervention or organisational activities. Especially publications from AIDS services and Human Rights organisations pictured, rather than explicitly named, ‘womenandchildren’ (Enloe 2000) as their programmes’ main beneficiaries. Environmental and conservancy organisations often included scenes of Namibian wildlife in their publications. The choice of images highlighted some interesting contradictions. For example most pictures in documents of AIDS service

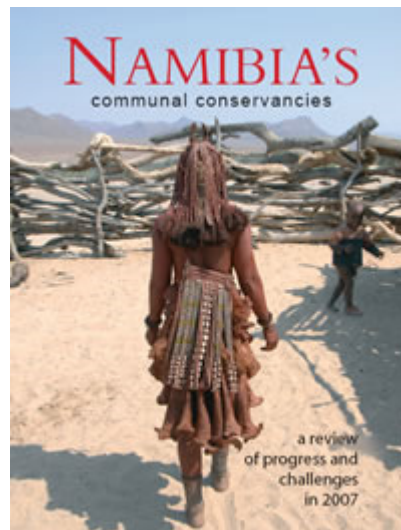
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111 Ewa Domanska (2006), however, criticised the tendency of thing theory to treat things like people and furnish them with individual biographies.

organisations featured the very old and the very young, the two population groups with the lowest HIV infection rate, and environmental organisations mostly used aesthetic pictures of a seemingly undisturbed nature rather than representing an environment in need of protection. The contradiction shows that the attraction of aesthetic presentation outweighed the arguments for a truthful depiction of NGO beneficiaries - as terminally ill AIDS patients, tortured prisoners and devastated landscapes usually do not make attractive report covers.



(Website of the Namibia Nature Foundation [www.nnf.org.na](http://www.nnf.org.na))



Website of the National Association of CBNRM Organisations ([www.nacso.org.na](http://www.nacso.org.na)).<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> The picture of the Himba woman is an interesting combination of the vulnerability and the nature topic. The Ovahimba are a pastoralist community who have turned into the poster group of Namibia's indigenous peoples. Although NACSO does include a few Ovahimba conservancies, they constitute a small minority. The report's cover therefore repeats the aesthetic of tourist catalogues instead of

In sum, images in NGO reports represented Namibia above all as vulnerable and wild and thus in need of external intervention to “empower” and domesticate. There is something unsettlingly similar about the representation of beneficiaries by civil society organizations and colonial images of Africans as simultaneously helpless and potentially dangerous, which provided the justification for foreign intervention.<sup>113</sup> Similar to the effect of Project Hope’s survey to prove “vulnerability” of OVCs and thus to justify external intervention by the NGO, the pictures simultaneously illustrated recipients’ vulnerability and provided proofs of organisational action, mostly in form of workshop images. They usually showed somebody in front of a flipchart and a half-visible audience typically outside in a scene of village workshops. These images thus represented rural communities as particularly vulnerable and in need of the training the NGOs provided. The reports’ images are an example of how documents, put together in a specific way, represent particular world-views in powerful ways (Harper 1998:35) by imposing a certain order of meaning and action and excluding alternative narratives (Latour 1990).



LAC



NACSO

### **From aesthetics to activism**

As Annelise Riles (2006) notes “to document” has become a verb, and “to document” has developed into arguably one of most important activities of civil society. The trend amongst NGOs above all to document their own activities is partly a response to pressure for increased accountability and transparency from donors, but

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depicting the majority of the NGO’s beneficiaries. See Sobania 2002 for a related argument about Maasai/Zulu.

<sup>113</sup> See Palma 2005; Hayes/Sylvester 1999; Dunn 2004; Vaughan 1991

very often civil society organisations promote those values themselves.<sup>114</sup> Documents give a sense of organisational action and are used as main evidence of accomplishments, not only vis-à-vis outside actors like donors and the government, but to the organisations themselves. The number of reports was often quoted as main evidence and major goal of organisational action. When NANGOF's director presented the umbrella's main activities in the previous quarter to the Board she first mentioned the publications (Research Notes 07/04/2008). NANGOF's main funding budget lists the publication of at least 3 newsletters for the first quarter and the compilation of an annual report for the remaining 3 quarters of the first funding year (European Commission 2002).

Reports have thus arguably developed from tools to document organisational activities into a major form of civic activism.<sup>115</sup> According to NANGOF's director a central task of the umbrella is to "translate output into impact", and to promote its members through its reports, documents and database (Research Notes 08/07/2008). One NGO director proposed that NANGOF should use each issue of its e-newsletter to document the work of one particular member.<sup>116</sup> The "will to document", the concern of activists to know and catalogue what was "happening out there" required a unified image of civic activism which resulted in attempts to establish a single version of civic activism in the form of several ethical codes like NANGOF's Code of Conduct, its catalogue of best practices and the code for organisations working with volunteers. As Peter Pels (2000) notes ethical documents try to discipline members of a profession so that its clients could have trust in the technical and moral quality of the service rendered. Documents therefore did not only catalogue organisational action, they also streamlined it and adjusted it to fit a unified format of civil society action. Terms of References, Codes of Conduct, constitutions and membership applications all regulated inter-NGO relations by making it explicit what was expected from NGOs and how the relation would be monitored, including potential sanctions for failure to comply (NANGOF March 2007b).

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114 On the ever increasing influence of terms like "accountability" and "transparency" in academia see Brenneis 2006; Strathern 2000.

115 In a similar development human rights NGOs have increasingly focused on research and reporting at the expense of training and advice. The Legal Assistance Centre has closed all but two of its regional offices and has practically abandoned its free litigation service to concentrate on legal research.

116 Interview Country Director Project Hope, Windhoek 12/06/2008.

### *Documenting the future: The document as vorausweisendes Geleit*

Documents delineated what was legitimate or even thinkable in contemporary civic activism, and they showed what activities were possible in the future. An entire genre of civil society documents was oriented towards the future and was thus civil society's *vorausweisendes Geleit* (Heidegger 1998).<sup>117</sup> Project proposals, concept papers, business plans and agendas functioned as roadmaps, structured the conceptual thinking about new projects and delineated the course of permissible action. At the Director's Forum one delegate proposed to draw up a concept paper to define "what we want the Directors' Forum to do" (Research notes 27/06/2008). Business and activity plans framed future civic activism in concrete and measurable ways and attached a timeline to projects which provided the main and arguably only reference point to evaluate a project's progress. In a related argument Annelise Riles (2006) notes that in the absence of any external reference point the only way to measure a meeting's progress was the ticking off of one agenda item after the next.<sup>118</sup> Documents thus structured present and delineated future civic activism. Documenting created a path dependency that heavily influenced what NGOs could plan for in future projects.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has proposed to analyse documents as actants which makes it possible to see the dynamics of people-document relations that transform both. It also allows us to conceptualise the role of documents in civil society beyond crude functionalism which sees them only as tools in funding applications and feedback regimes. Database columns construct the terms of civic engagement; blanks obscure activities and render others particularly visible. Tables present civic activism as ordered and coherent system without blurred boundaries, ethical codes regulate inter-organisational relations and concept papers delineate the scope and shape of future activism. Papers' careers craft institutional perspectives and documents have arguably become the prime mode of civic activism.

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117 It is difficult to give an exact translation of Martin Heidegger's phrase which implies that the person or thing accompanies and guides at the same time and by doing so delineates the field of possible future actions, an approximate translation would maybe be "guide pointing the way ahead".

118 See the argument in the next chapter about agendas as the most important reference point in civil society meetings.

Documenting as practice in civil society includes its internal dynamics, unforeseen and unintended consequences, because it results from the dynamic relationship between things and people. This relationship was usually not articulated in narratives that all too often presented documents as mere tools to achieve set goals in civil society. Analysing documents as more than just means to achieve a given end shows that documentation was a civil society practice that revolved around formalities and thus exemplifies the basic tensions between NGOs' aspirations and their daily work. NGOs often presented reports and databases in instrumental terms, as tools to enhance their close involvement of recipients. However, documents had the exact opposite effect, because they systematically prioritised questions of form over content and constituted a self referential system, in which it was most important that each document reproduced formalities of previous documents. The case study showed that Project Hope's documentation was shaped by the NGO's relations to its donors and peers and did not match recipients' everyday experiences. However the NGO presented the resulting contradictions as consequence of improper wording instead of indicating a deep contradiction between the two logics which would require the organisation to considerably rethink its project design. It shows that documents were usually designed without an external reference point and the blanks in Project Hope's questionnaire indicated that NGO documents might not always adequately represent social realities of target communities. The absence of external references was also visible in coordinating as another dominant civil society practice.



## Chapter 4 Of Committees and Commitment

**REG:** Right, now, eh. Item four: attainment of world supremacy within the next five years. Eh, Francis, you've been doing some work on this.

**FRANCIS:** Yeah, thank you, Reg. Well, quite frankly, siblings, I think five years is optimistic, unless we can smash the Roman empire within the next twelve months.

**REG:** Twelve months?

**FRANCIS:** Yeah. Twelve months. And let's face it... as empires go, this is the big one, so we've got to get up of our arses, and stop just talking about it.

**LORETTA:** I agree. It's action that counts, not words, and we need action now.

**REG:** You're right. We could sit around here all day talking, passing resolutions, making clever speeches, it's not going to shift one Roman soldier.

**FRANCIS:** So let's just stop gabbing on about it, it's completely pointless, and it's getting us nowhere.

**LORETTA:** I agree. This is a complete waste of time.

--[Judith runs in, panicked.]

**JUDITH :** They've arrested Brian!! They've dragged him off. They're going to crucify him.

**REG:** Right. This calls for immediate discussion!

**JUDITH:** What?!?

**REG:** Immediate.

**DIET:** Right.

**LORETTA:** New motion?

**REG:** Completely new motion. Eh, That, ah. That there be, ah, immediate action...

**FRANCIS:** ... ah, once the vote has been taken.

**REG:** Well, obviously once the vote has been taken, you can't act on a resolution 'till you've voted on it!

**JUDITH :** Reg, for God's sake, let's go now, please!

**REG:** Yeah, yeah. Right, right. In the, in the light of fresh information from, ah, sibling Judith.

**LORETTA:** [taking notes] Ah, not so fast, Reg.

**JUDITH:** Reg, for God's sake. It's perfectly simple. All you've got to do is to go out of that door now, and try to stop the Romans nailing him up. It's happening, Reg! Something's actually HAPPENING, Reg! Can't you understand? Yaaargh! [She rushes out in a rage.]

**FRANCIS:** Oh. Oh dear.<sup>119</sup>

Meetings are ubiquitous in civil society. People meet in working groups, committees, in Councils, Boards or expert panels. In June 2008 the new NANGOF secretariat was fully staffed and started to organise regular meetings. This June was also the last month of my yearlong fieldwork with the umbrella and I gained a first impression what work for the fully established NANGOF meant when I attended 20 meetings in 23 working days. NANGOF worked with eight Sector Working Groups that met regularly every six months, but often resolved to have a follow up meeting, thus doubling the number of SWG meetings. The elected NANGOF Council met once a quarter, the general meeting of all NANGOF members was held once a year and the umbrella also organized meetings for all sector specific umbrellas, for all NGO managers and issue-based conferences.<sup>120</sup> Spread across the year there was hardly any

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<sup>119</sup> Monty Python, Life Of Brian, Transcript of the Screenplay  
[http://orange-cow.org/pythonet/scripts/Life\\_of\\_Brian\\_Screenplay.txt](http://orange-cow.org/pythonet/scripts/Life_of_Brian_Screenplay.txt)

<sup>120</sup> For one example see the next chapter's description of NANGOF's Consultative Conference on the government's Civic Organisations Partnership Bill.

week without a scheduled meeting in addition to the weekly staff meeting. It could be argued that the experience of NANGOF is exceptional, because an umbrella existed to coordinate civic activism and thus organizing meetings for its members was its *raison d'être*. However, these meetings were attended by delegates from “regular” NGOs. NGOs were very often also members of specific umbrellas that in turn organised meetings and had standing committees of their own. NGOs usually had their annual general meetings and several specific workshops for their members throughout the year. Most large NGOs had their own weekly staff meeting and those registered as Trusts like NANGOF also had a governing Board of Trustees that met several times throughout the year. Meetings were therefore not as specific to umbrellas as it may appear at first glance.

Meetings were often presented as enhancing civil society's effectiveness by providing opportunities to network, by coordinating activism and enhance information sharing. However, the experience of meetings was often very different. They hardly produced any concrete outcome and large parts of the discussions centred on protocol issues and the planning of further meetings. Like in the Monty Python piece at the beginning, it seemed that meetings never resulted in any actions outside the boardroom and they entirely revolved around protocol issues.<sup>121</sup> The meetings' inefficiency stood in stark contrast to the ambitious goals people set for them. In fact these aims were often so wide-ranging that it was impossible for any single meeting to address them. The Directors' Forum Planning Session in September 2003 set out to “assess the current situation of NANGOF in general” (NANGOF 12 September 2003), NANGOF's Executive Council meeting was to find ways how “NANGOF [could] represent civil society [and how to] reinstall donor trust in Civic organizations; [achieve] greater commitment from the private sector; [and devise] focused activities to support its member organizations (NANGOF 13 July 2005). Usually at the end of a meeting the ambitious plans were postponed to a follow-up meeting.

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121 See also Riles (2000: 52) point that networks between women's organisations in Fiji were mostly tools to create further networks.

This chapter looks at the contradictions between image and reality of meetings and argues that meetings fulfilled important functions in the organisational life of civil society, but had little impact outside the meeting room. Participants were well aware of the contradiction between expectations and outcomes, but still attended regularly. The chapter argues that they did so because meetings fulfilled an entirely different set of functions than they were set up for; in meetings people could rally support for their projects, reinforce personal friendships and close links between organisations; they could question other's integrity and agendas and exercised control while they formally talked about business. People also attended meeting after meeting because the inherent logic of coordination always required yet another meeting to seemingly finally bring about closure. Meetings continuously postponed outcomes and therefore created a system of perpetual meetings. Coordination was thus a practice, i.e. a coherent system of individual actions with an inherent logic. As such coordination was inherently self-referential and meetings produced above all one thing: more meetings.

### *Meetings – the Paradoxes*

#### **The “real” work**

People in civil society spend a large share of their time in meetings, but they never referred to them as their “real” work. Proper NGO work, in their opinion, was project implementation - giving training, conducting research or advocating for particular policies. Most meetings started with an introductory round where people presented their organisation's work and which thus re-affirmed the distinction between “proper work” and meetings. Nobody said that s/he was above all attending meetings, but always presented their work in terms of “projects” like environmental research, HIV counselling, litigation or communal training. One NGO director said that meetings were like “holiday” compared to his “proper” work which was far more demanding.<sup>122</sup> However, civil society activism was shot through with all kinds of meetings, coordination meetings at the umbrellas, meetings at different ministries, meetings with donors and meetings with regional and international NGOs. We were

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122 Interview Director /Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 18/07/2008.

left wondering how much time activists actually spend at their “real work” and what exactly this true work was.<sup>123</sup>

## **Protocol**

Meetings might not figure as “real” work, because many people in civil society saw them as an informal exchange of ideas and experience amongst those whose “real” NGO work was similar, be it because they worked on the same topic or because they held the same positions in their organisation. NANGOF’s Sectoral Working Groups<sup>124</sup> were established as common platform for organisations working on a similar topic to exchange ideas and agree on common priorities in the sector.<sup>125</sup> The Directors’ Forum was set up as an informal exchange amongst senior managers to exchange experiences of leadership across the sectors. (Research Notes 27/06/2008).

The idea of an informal exchange however stood in stark contrast to the often strict adherence to protocol and the central role of written formalities. The NANGOF secretariat sent out an official invitation with an agenda two weeks before each meeting it organised and reminded participants with a formal letter a few days before the date. The agenda was repeated at the start of the meeting together with an official registration form followed by a formal introductory round of the participants. One of the first items on the agenda was the adoption of the previous meeting’s minutes and often also a discussion about the proposed agenda for the current meeting.<sup>126</sup> During the meeting one NANGOF staff member took minutes circulated a few days later with the official resolutions and a short summary of the way forward. After the first round

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123 One director admitted that 80% of her work was communication with other NGOs to “coordinate” work and only 20% were conversations about their “proper work”. Interview National Coordinator/Namibian Association of CBNRM support organisations 24/06/2008

124 The eight Sector Working Groups are environment, gender, health, human rights, training, development, education and social justice.

125 Interview Chairman of the NANGOF Board of Trustees/NANGOF, Windhoek 10/06/2008

126 The NANGOF Annual General Meeting (AGM) on 7 July 2005 illustrates this procedure well. The AGM started with the approval of the agenda, followed by a formal welcome and two presentations. After that the assembly adopted the minutes of the previous AGM, followed by reports from the NANGOF chairperson, the Treasurers and the Sector Working Groups. The new NANGOF directory of civil society organisations was launched, before delegates elected the new Executive Council. The strict protocol contradicts the idea of the AGM as informal exchange between all NANGOF members to generate new ideas and the absence of any discussion of substantial issues contrasted sharply with the idea that the AGM should decide on the course of the sector wide umbrella and thus arguable on the course of a major player in Namibian civil society.

of Sector Working Group meetings, the Directors' Forum and the Consultative conference on the partnership bill there was a week or two at the NANGOF secretariat when all three Capacity Building Officers did nothing but write and distribute the minutes of all previous meetings (Research notes 21/07/2008).<sup>127</sup>

Participants in meetings were often aware that their plans to meet informally stood in stark contrast to meetings' actual procedures and occasionally complained about the rigid structures of meetings. One director threatened to leave immediately if a meeting proceeded in this formalised manner and another questioned the necessity of an introduction round, because according to her "we all know each other well already" (Research Notes 24/07/2008). However, most of the time people went along with protocol issues and even requested the formalities. At the Consultative Conference on the partnership bill participants asked for the provisional minutes mid-way through the conference to remind them on what had been discussed (Research Notes 13/07/2008). Attendees at the Directors' Forum asked for the meeting minutes from previous years to discuss the re-launch of the Forum.

## **Networks**

Although meetings were seen as "additional" work, people attended, because they saw meetings as good opportunities to exchange ideas and "network". In every SWG meeting in June 2008 participants hoped to find out what others were doing or "what was happening" in the sector (Research Notes 01/07 2008). Civil society executives saw the Directors' Forum as useful arena to learn how others managed NGOs and hoped to receive some tips from their peers (Research Notes 27/06/2008). However participants in meetings said very little about their specific activities and meetings hardly provided people with insights into 'what was happening out there'. Very often attendees resolved to have a specific inquiry into civil society activism before they could plan the next steps (Research Notes 27/06; 13/07 and 01/07/2008). At this point - usually towards the end of the meeting- participants seemed to have forgotten that it was part of the present meeting's purpose to gather more information about civic activism.

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127 Annelise Riles makes a similar point when she argues that attending meetings and "networking" with their peers was a fulltime commitment for most activists in Fiji (2000: 57)

The expectation to “network” and learn what others were doing was quite surprising considering the fact that most meetings brought together the same group of people over and over again. As chapter 2 has argued, most people in civil society had been working in the sector for a long time and encountered each other in numerous meetings throughout the year. As one NGO director pointed out, out of 26 participants at the Directors’ Forum ten sat on the NANGOF Board and another director anticipated that attendees of the Directors’ Forum would also be the delegates for the NANGOF AGM. Meeting the same people over and over again might have prevented participants from picking up new trends in other’s work. Most had only a vague idea about what others were doing, although people occasionally did try to give a more detailed description of their work, especially when their organisation had shifted its focus. “The rainbow project” (TRP) has recently moved the focus of its activity from advocacy around LGBM rights to service delivery. TRP’s director highlighted this very important shift for his organisation during one of NANGOF’s Board meetings, but people did not seem to have taken the information in. During the consultative conference a fortnight later Board members still referred to the TRP as advocacy organisation (Research Notes 13/07/2008). Even if people gave a more detailed picture of their work the organisation’s dominant image obviously prevailed and was very resistant to change.

This indicates that people did not use the information they shared during meetings. Annelise Riles makes a related argument about the confusion about how exactly greater information sharing would benefit people’s everyday work (2000: 50). She demonstrates how NGO members, donor representatives and UN officials in Suva use meetings to create ever more networks without discussing how an improved coordination would advance their specific cause. To coordinate thus becomes an end in itself and coordinative meetings are integral part of wider activists networks which she defines as internally closed system of institutions, knowledge practices and artefacts thereof (2000:3). In this sense, meetings are one manifestation of networks, which in the Namibian context complemented more institutionalised forms of “networking” like sectoral umbrellas. The Namibian Association of conservancy organisations lists networking as one of its main aims, the Joint Consultative Council

seeks to enhance networking in the small enterprise sector, NANASO's vision is to provide "networking services amongst members"<sup>128</sup> and enabling networks across civil society is one of the three key goals of NANGOF. As with Fijian activists, Namibian umbrellas hardly explained why networking was so essential in the first place and how exactly greater coordination would contribute to greater environmental conservation, enhance human rights work or promote civil society's role in development.

### **The "single voice"**

Meetings were often said to increase civil society's impact by providing the sector with an opportunity to find and "speak with one voice" as the director of one sectoral umbrella expressed it.<sup>129</sup> This was seen as essential because civil society needed to reach consensus in broad questions of advocacy, in order to have more impact on policy making.<sup>130</sup> One NGO director said at the Directors' Forum that NGO executives needed to ask themselves what the Forum could do better than individual organisations and answered himself saying that the Forum could have more impact through combining participants' influences (Research Notes 27/06/2008).

However, meetings hardly coordinated work. Taking up sector wide concerns would have meant additional work for already overcommitted activists.<sup>131</sup> Attendees were thus reluctant to take up additional work, let alone to coordinate a whole series of tasks amongst themselves. The meetings' resolutions were hardly the selection of the most urgent issues at the end of long deliberations on alternative priorities. In every meeting I attended for NANGOF the participants chose to act on the issues that were well prepared and presented without discussing alternative topics. After the first SWG meeting in July 2008 the NANGOF staff felt that the discussion needed a more structured approach and started to suggest their own priorities, above all advocacy work around relevant new policies and bills. They suggested this to all SWGs and all

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128 See [www.nananso.com.na](http://www.nananso.com.na) (last accessed 28/04/2010).

129 Executive Director NANASO 22/07/2008.

130 Interview Chairman of the NANGOF Board of Trustees/NANGOF, Windhoek 10/06/2008 and Research Notes 22/07/2008.

131 At the NANGOF staff meeting after the Directors' Forum the secretariat thought that the high turnout of senior managers at the Forum was a "small wonder". Usually only a few senior managers attend any civil society wide meeting because most were out of town (Research Notes 30/06/2008).

working groups adopted this as priority. The SWG gender has focused above all on law reform reflecting the decisive influence of the two strongest organisations in the sector, the LAC's gender unit and Sister Namibia. In SWGs where no organisation pushed a particular issue the group usually did not agree on a common priority (Research Notes 01/07/2008). Meetings were thus not platforms for free deliberation and often presented a particular predefined opinion as consensus. Meetings therefore provided already strong organisations with an even louder voice, because they could prepare a convincing presentation which was likely to gain support. Meetings were thus good opportunities for participants to rally support for their position because resources were often too scarce to investigate alternative options and well presented points of view were often accepted.

### **The expert forum**

Institutionalised meetings like NANGOF's sector working groups were usually presented as the backbone of the umbrella, the location of the real expertise and source of legitimacy for anyone claiming to represent civil society. NANGOF's director said that even the umbrella's chairperson could not claim to represent civil society if he was not mandated by the SWG or by the annual meeting of all NANGOF members (Research Notes 14/ 05/2008). Meetings were presented as pooling expertise in civil society and thus arriving at truly informed decisions. The SWGs as NANGOF's "expert forums" usually appointed an organisation, which acted as mouthpiece for the group and was usually presented as leading expert in its specific field. But very often lead organisations were chosen on more mundane grounds. The Urban Trust for example became the lead organisation for the Sector group on Urban and Rural development because they had a boardroom large enough to host the meetings.

Contrary to the image of meetings as generating expert decisions most meetings only identified the need for further information before anything could be decided or done. Very often deferrals were a set point on the meetings' agenda, often under headings like 'thinking about the way forward'. This 'way forward' usually took the shape of another meeting, committee or task force. Decisions were thus constantly moved forward to the next meeting or shifted into even smaller



committees. In many meetings the participants felt they could not arrive at a decision, because they either knew too little about the issue and needed to have more information or because an important group was not present and needed to be consulted before a final decision could be made. The continual deferral of decisions and resolutions stood in stark contrast to the overall idea that what committees were all about was decision-making. Meetings above all announced decisions rather than bringing them about and the constant shift of action into the next meeting resulted in no action at all. When NANGOF's Executive Council was to be reconstituted the outgoing council decided to hold a special "brainstorming" session about the way forward instead of discussing the matter then and there (NANGOF July 13, 2005). The Directors' Forum resolved at its very first planning meeting to have an additional session a week later, in order to work out the exact role of the Forum within NANGOF (NANGOF September 12, 2003).

In sum, the meetings that were designed as platforms for exchange amongst experts were often caught up in discussions about procedures and formalities and hardly discussed substantial issues. Both participants and outsiders would later present those meetings as source of knowledge within civil society and as place where civil society meets and interacts; and meetings were indeed an important source of knowledge albeit a particular kind of knowledge. Meetings did not lead to a better understanding of other organisations' work or provide people with clearer ideas about areas for cooperation, but they supplied people with knowledge about procedures, protocol and information about other meetings. Riles (2000: 59) observed that speakers at meetings in Fiji often alluded to decisions of previous meetings and used acronyms that excluded any new participant. They thus stressed their affiliation to wider activist networks and demonstrated that networkers were above all defined by their personal and institutional connections.

Information exchange was a value in itself and did not have to be discussed in reference to external issues. As Helen Schwartzman (1989:276) argued, meetings always reflect dominant norms of interaction and interpretation. Civil society's meetings therefore mirrored dominant perceptions in the sector that consultations were desirable as ends in themselves and that decisions had to be taken collectively rather than in a hierarchical manner. In this sense meetings were the central place

where people displayed the emphasis civil society placed on consultation and negotiated rules of proper interaction.

### **Assigning representation**

Meetings did not only constantly shift decisions forward, they also transferred their action to particular individuals by appointing delegates. Whenever the meetings needed to nominate a spokesperson usually the same few individuals were chosen, despite the fact that those were the people already so overcommitted that they could hardly be expected to fulfil their new duties. In fact they already had a reputation for not being able to realise their commitments, but they were still appointed over and over again. When the new advisory committee on the government's partnership bill needed two representatives from civil society, the sector nominated the NANGOF chairperson and the founder of the NANGOF Trust. Both were well known for being overcommitted, and doubts were raised whether either of them would really be able to attend any of the committee meetings. NANGOF's director expected already that she would have to stand in for them (Research Notes 02/06/2008).

It was quite strange that over-committed people got nominated and it was even more surprising that people took up the responsibilities knowing perfectly well that they would not have the time to live up to the task and really fulfil their role. Why did they not just decline the offer and suggest somebody with more time? Part of the explanation was surely that some committees had significant influence and committees like Boards were held in high esteem. Boards were often seen as the embodiment of an organisation's democratic principles and as having wide-ranging influence on the work of NGOs. They selected and monitored the organisation's management, they approved the budget and the Board's chairperson, rather than the executive director, acted as the official spokesperson for the NGO. NANGOF's Board of Trustees had run the organisation in the years when NANGOF could not afford to employ any fulltime staff. When new funding was secured the Trustees selected the incoming executive director and when the new NANGOF Secretariat took shape some Trustees still felt they had a say in the umbrella's management. The new director once said she really did not know why the Board had appointed her in the first place, because it seemed to her they were still running NANGOF (Research Notes 26/02/2008).

The powers of Boards and their image as the embodiment of democracy and transparency stood in sharp contrast to the secrecy of their meetings. NANGOF Board meetings were not open to members and their minutes were only distributed amongst the Trustees. No written evidence of them was found in the umbrella's annual report or any other publication. It seems that accountability and transparency, so much emphasised in the daily administration of NANGOF, did not concern its Board. The wide-ranging power to steer the umbrella's course was often opposed to the Trustees' little knowledge of the organisation's daily routine and duties.<sup>132</sup> Sitting on a Board was a political office and trustees were elected and not chosen because of their profound knowledge of the NGO they governed.<sup>133</sup> The Boards' prestige might have partly explained why over-committed activists volunteered to be delegates, but Board meetings embodied a new set of internal contradictions.

### *Explaining the paradoxes in meetings*

Participants were well aware that meetings were not necessarily informal exchanges between experts to network and coordinate work. If meetings did not do what they were supposed to do, why did people have them in the first place? Why did they spend so much time at them, and why did they continue holding onto the idea that they were important? The managerial literature on meetings has often focused on this contradiction. Nicholas Romano and Jay Nunamaker (2001:11) conclude that

several decades of studies [in management science] reveal [that] meetings are very costly in both terms money and time (...) In general meetings are unproductive, wasteful and suffer from a myriad of problems, making managers and workers alike dissatisfied with the process and the outcomes in many cases. [However], meetings are essential to accomplish tasks that individuals cannot complete by themselves.

Scholars have often assumed that meetings' effectiveness was decreased by faulty implementation and lack of proper planning. They thus advised to increase meetings' rates of return by selecting participants more carefully, by preparing better

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132 The elitist tendencies were occasionally criticised by staff and volunteers at the NANGOF secretariat, e.g. the Board members were once referred to as "glory-seekers" in a staff meeting (Research Notes 10/03/2008). See also Schwartzman (1989: 148).

133 There were notable exceptions though. The LAC's Board for example consists mostly of the NGOs' former directors who have a profound knowledge of its work.

and implementing agendas more rigidly (Kloppenborg/Petrick 1999; Nixon/Littlepage 1992; Tropman 1996). However, Nicoals Romano and Jay Nunamaker's (2001) overview reveals that a long tradition of advice literature has not resulted in meetings that are effective enough to make further advice redundant. The continuing failure of the literature to make meetings more efficient might indicate that the gap between expectations and outcomes might not be a question of better planning or improved implementation but might lie at the very heart of the meeting's design. This chapter therefore sees the gap between expectations and outcomes as a valuable starting point for an analysis that seeks to understand what meetings in Namibian civil society actually did instead of trying to determine how they ought to function. The section will start with a typical example of a civil society meeting by describing the SWG education meeting of July 1st 2008. SWG meetings were in fact all very similar and the NANGOF staff sometimes left the boardroom in their 6th or 7th SWG meeting to read the paper next door, because they had heard it all before. Procedures and topics were constantly re-occurring across different types of meetings and over the years. Since meetings resembled each other over the years and across thematic boundaries I will give one detailed description of a meeting to demonstrate some generic features of civil society meetings.

### *The Sector Working Group Education Meeting 1 July 2008*

The meeting is scheduled for 8.30 in the morning and starts with tea/coffee for 30 minutes which is necessary because about half of the attendees arrived just in time for the proper meeting to start. Those who had been in early chat over coffee as they obviously know each other well. At 9am a NANGOF employee welcomes everybody and asks participants to do a short introductory round in which everyone is asked to say their name, organisation and what they expected from the meeting. From the seven people attending the meeting, three hope to find out how the SWG can assist their organisation, either because they have just started an NGO or they manage an established organisation that is taking on a new project in education. All seven wish to get more information about other organisations working in education and hope to establish a forum to speak about education from a civil society perspective. One of the participants is from an international donor agency and has come with several reports

the donor had commissioned. She had brought the reports in order to solicit comments from civil society before the findings are officially launched.

Following the introduction NANGOF's director gives a presentation on the role of the secretariat, stressing very much how important the SWGs are for the umbrella's functioning. Then she opens the floor for a general discussion about which issues in education the SWG wishes to take up. During the following discussion participants agree that formal education in Namibia is in bad shape and civil society should do something to improve the standards. However, what form this intervention should take exactly is not agreed. One lady is keen to further the agenda on early childhood development, two others are interested in school boards,<sup>134</sup> and two women propose to work on educational programmes in the mass media. Everyone explains why his/her particular concern is central to improve the standards in education, and no one is prepared to give it up in favour of a common priority. At the end the group resolves to comment on the reports the donor representative has brought and to have a special workshop to deal with them a fortnight later. Everybody agrees to read the reports until then and two people are asked to prepare a small presentation on the reports to facilitate the group's input.

The meeting included most paradoxes outlined in the chapter's first section, the heightened expectations of meetings for networking and information sharing, the participants' self image as experts and the modest results after 2 hours discussion. It was my first SWG meeting and I left it considerably disillusioned. My colleagues at the NANGOF Secretariat felt the same, but other participants did not appear to share our disappointment and seemed to be used to this outcome. The NANGOF staff was so disappointed because the meeting did not create a closer network between attendees. Everyone was so occupied with his/her priorities that they did not take up other people's arguments or try to combine their interests. The meeting's main resolution to comment on the reports was not the result of expert agreement on the most important topic. The reports concerned very different topics in education, school boards, inclusive education and a new project called etsip (education and training

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134 School boards are regular committees in schools made up of teachers, learners and parents.

sector improvement programme). The SWG simply decided to comment on all of them and thus acted on what was tangible instead of on what was urgent.<sup>135</sup>

NANGOF staff had expected the meeting to produce a common project that all organisations in the Sector Working Group would take forward and hoped that the meeting would also create a closer link between the umbrella and its members. We were quite disappointed when it did none of the above and this had surely to do with our inexperience in civil society's meeting culture and our unrealistic expectations about the outcome. But what were then "realistic" expectations on meetings and what did they actually do if they did not fulfil the purpose for which they were arranged in the first place? The next section will argue that meetings displayed and reinforce social relations between organisations and individuals, they provided activists' commitment with an ever new impetus by constantly deferring hope to the next meeting, and most importantly- and most obviously- they generated more meetings and thus enabled the organisational life of civil society to constantly renew itself.

### *The social life in meetings - Repetition and Relevance*

The formal procedures of very different meetings were almost always the same. Most meetings started with tea and an introductory round followed by the adoption of minutes from the previous meeting and some form of presentation and a general discussion. The very rigid regularity was consistently enforced and made the course of any meeting highly predictable. Writing about a political meeting in the Kilimanjaro region in Tanzania Sally Falk Moore (1977) has argued that the formality of meetings as "secular rituals" limits the range of improvisation and thus conveys the message that certain things are unquestionable and simply cannot be changed. This way ceremonial form domesticates the indeterminacy of the event and turns any particular ceremony into a part in a wider chain of similar events. Participants use the same phrases and behave in similar ways as they or their predecessors have done at similar occasions (Bloch 2004:68). This repetition creates permanence (Myerhoff

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135 Finding priority issues in education was already discussed in 2006 when the SWG education decided it needed a clearer focus and nominated three people to "look into the matter". The three delegates were typical nominees, they were well connected, already very busy and usually received most nominations from the sector. Judging from past minutes it does not appear that the delegates ever delivered those findings.

1984) and provides participants with a sense of continuity of self and the world around them (Kertzer, 1988:9-10).

Participants in meetings displayed and negotiated social relations in meetings by formally talking about business. From this perspective it becomes less important that people did not share important information in meetings and hardly found a common priority. Meetings in Namibian civil society consolidated relations and confirmed closeness between organisations. The SWG gender could agree on a common priority because the two major organisations, the LAC gender unit and Sister Namibia, worked closely together. Where organisations did not work together the SWG was weak: this was the case with the Sector Working Groups “Training”, “Education” and “Social Justice”. Meetings not only displayed organisational cooperation, participants also used them as an opportunity to stage togetherness. In civil society wide meetings NGO representatives from the same sector usually sat together.<sup>136</sup> NANGOF and several other NGOs organised their Board meetings as working lunches. The official reason was that Trustees did not receive a sitting fee and the NGO pays for their service with a free meal.<sup>137</sup> However, lunching together is a social occasion and strengthens the relations between Trustees and consolidates their personal attachment to the organisation. Meetings did not only display closeness between organisations but also within NGOs. As Helen Schwartzman (1989:42) argued, in meetings attendees could comment on others’ personal commitment or assert their position vis-à-vis their organisation while they made factual decisions. This minimised the risk for open conflict, but very often power relations were only thinly veiled. NANGOF’s director said that the NANGOF Trustees who opposed her often asked petty questions about her management style and always found something to criticise whereas those supporting her tried to fend off the critique. One Trustee for example demanded that the director’s probation period was extended from three to six months, but the chairperson replied that the probation time was set out in the contract and could not be changed retrospectively. While all were talking about business the

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136 At the Consultative Conference the NANGOF staff and the chairperson of the board sat together, and so did the directors from environmental organisations, and the heads of organisations working with disabled people.

137 The free lunch seemed to be a popular motivation for Trustees. When the Joint Consultative Council’s (JCC) new director changed the catering for “her” Board from a full lunch to fat cakes attendance started to decline rapidly (Research Notes 19/02/ 2008).

director suspected that the question was a comment on her performance and a power struggle between NANGOF's Board and executive rather than a remark on the probation period (Research Notes 26/02/2008).

It is striking that contested discussions in Board meetings were around protocol issues, and critical questions were asked about personal performances rather than about substantive issues like which projects NANGOF should take up or how the organisation should relate towards the government. Those points were usually "acknowledged" or "noted" after the fact rather than decided. Helen Schwartzman (1989: 238) notes that the discussion about particular persons in board meetings allowed participants to comment on their relation to the organisation and talk themselves in and out of the organisation. By critiquing the organisation's director Board members displayed their commitment to the institution and reaffirmed their prominent position in the organisational hierarchy in the guise of talking about work.<sup>138</sup> Conflict was legitimate, because it was presented for the sake of the organisation. By criticizing the director NANGOF Trustees made a statement about their personal connection to the umbrella. Asserting the right to comment on particular management decisions meant that Trustees had a meaningful role in the running of NANGOF and showed that they had the umbrella's best interests at heart. It allowed them to present themselves as the guardians of the umbrella. By criticizing the director Trustees claimed their special privilege to speak on behalf of the organisation, especially vis-à-vis the appointed staff. Finding fault with the director's management was therefore not only a statement about the relations between particular persons, it also displayed the conflictual relations between the elected and appointed NANGOF group. The discussions in Board meetings mostly concerned protocol issues and were arguably about hierarchies and interpersonal relations between people, as well as between people and organisations. What was left undiscussed, however, was the direction NANGOF was heading and what constituted meaningful civic activism more generally. The next section argues that the rules for proper conduct in civil society were the result of multiple smaller attempts to control and streamline activism.

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<sup>138</sup> March and Olsen 1976:11 cited in Schwartzman 1989: 128.



### *Hierarchies and Civil society's "one voice"*

People regarded meetings as essential, because they coordinated civic organisations whose aim should be to “speak with one voice despite our diversity”.<sup>139</sup> A sector wide common position was thought to bring civil society much more influence in policy making and vis-à-vis donors. This “single voice” was all too often articulated by few vocal individuals from strong and well-connected organisations.<sup>140</sup> The Directors’ Forum, the consultative conference and all SWG meetings in 2008 relied on a small group of presenters and outspoken participants for input. All opportunities to speak at length were distributed amongst these 8-10 people.<sup>141</sup> Meetings publicly displayed the dominance of strong individuals and organisations by providing them with a reserved space to voice their opinion. This is not to say that the right to speak was consciously withheld from others, but it was only a small number of people who had both the image as competent expert and the relations to people deciding on those slots in order to be asked to give a presentation.<sup>142</sup> However, an even distribution of voice is a central precondition for an open discussion of alternatives and consensus finding. The meetings’ structure therefore foreclosed the chance of discussing alternatives and arriving at any resolution other than those suggested in the presentations. As Marilyn Strathern (2000:2) notes only certain social practices create accountability, i.e. take a form that will convince those to whom accountability is rendered, that accountability has indeed been achieved. In theory, plenary discussions in meetings provided all participants an equal opportunity to participate in decision finding which spoke directly to civil society’s central value of consultation. Activists could therefore present meetings as major forum to create

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139 Executive Director NANASO 22/07/2008; Interview Chairman of the NANGOF Board of Trustees/NANGOF, Windhoek 10/06/2008

140 See the distinction in chapter 1 between strong and weak organisations.

141 The NANGOF chairperson presented at the Directors’ Forum and the Consultative Conference, the director of the LAC presented at the same conference and he also spoke at length at the Directors’ Forum, one director of a children’s organisation gave different presentations in the sector working groups ‘education’ and ‘training’ and NANGOF’s director gave a presentation in each SWG meeting. This anecdotal list of presentations indicates that in different forums a same group of individuals shared all opportunities to speak at length.

142 This confirms the general distinction between strong and weak organisations. Typically the directors of strong organisations would be in a position to present at meetings and thus decisively influence the overall decision.

accountability in the sector while neglecting that meetings silenced alternative opinions through an uneven allocation of voice.

The prominent role of particular individuals and organisations in civil society's (one) voice was also visible in the patterned delegation of tasks assigned to a small number of people. Legal issues were usually referred to the LAC and not to the National Society for Human Rights that also employed a number of lawyers. When NANGOF needed to be represented, usually the chairperson of the Board was nominated although any Trustee could fulfil the task and delegates for committees around HIV/AIDS usually came from NANASO, although a lot of other organisations worked on the topic. Appointing representatives was as much a statement about individual or organisational prestige in civil society as it was about delegating tasks. This explains why the same people were nominated over and over again despite considerable doubts that they would have time to fulfil their duties and had to send a deputy. NANGOF's executive director often stood in for the chairperson in NPC- EC meetings<sup>143</sup> and went to the regional conference on poverty alleviation in his place (Research Notes 28/02/2008). Overcommitted people did not refuse to take up a new responsibility as they knew they would not necessarily have to do it themselves. By accepting the nomination they were acknowledging their status rather than making a definite commitment to the job.

### **The "common voice" and the disciplining project**

The very idea of having a sector wide common position indicated that some people wished for a more homogenised civil society. Directors of sectoral umbrella organisations were especially keen to create "synergies" in civil society through denser information exchange and a more centralised data storage. They were concerned that if umbrellas did not know about their members' activities this would ultimately lead to confusion. One director said that what he saw as chaotic state of civil society was brought about by "organisations coming into our land and work with

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<sup>143</sup> These were regular meetings between NANGOF, the government's 'National Planning Commission' and the 'Delegation of the European Commission to Namibia' which was NANGOF's major donor. For a more detailed discussion about these relations see chapter 6.

our constituencies and the umbrellas don't know about it".<sup>144</sup> Similarly NANGOF's director argued in each SWG meeting that members ought to provide NANGOF with information about their activities so that the umbrella could promote and support them. Directors of umbrellas stressed how important the coordinating role of their organisations was. NANGOF's chairperson said that it was only through coordination that civil society could demonstrate its contributions to development and that the sector risked over-investing in one area and neglecting important topics if organisations did not share information and coordinate their activities.<sup>145</sup> Occasionally civil society organisations would question this "will to know" and emphasised that the umbrella did not own them, i.e. could not demand services or information from them that they were not willing to share (Research Notes 17/06/2008). This indicated that some organisations saw meetings not as harmless service by umbrellas to enhance communication amongst members, but regarded them as intrusion into their work and as part of a centralised information gathering. Resistance often came from smaller organisations whereas directors of strong organisations said that NANGOF should ensure certain standards in civil society and thus wanted the umbrellas to survey civic activism more closely.<sup>146</sup>

Defining and maintaining standards was thus a way to delineate what counted as "proper" civic activism. More coordination in civil society presupposed a centralised decision which areas organisations should work in. "Coordination" and "ensuring standards" were thus subtle mechanisms to steer the sector's activism. The most important mechanism governing civic organisations were thus not the elected Boards<sup>147</sup> but patterns of peer review in which the stronger organisations and umbrellas usually assessed smaller organisations.

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144 Executive Director NANASO 22/07/2008.

145 Interview Chairman of the NANGOF Board of Trustees/NANGOF, Windhoek 10/06/2008.

146 Direct forms were attempts to enforce self regulation described in the next chapter and the often voiced opinion that NANGOF should "ensure standards" in civil society (Interview Chairman of the NANGOF Board of Trustees/NANGOF, Windhoek 10/06/2008; Research Notes 22/07/2008). The umbrellas tried to monitor civic organisations directly but also used indirect forms of surveillance like peer review and peer pressure. A director of a sectoral umbrella explained that she published success stories of members so that non-performing organisations felt embarrassed and doubled their efforts Interview Coordinator, National Association of CBNRM Organisations, Windhoek 24/06/2008.

147 This stood in stark contrast to the way NGOs presented accountability within civil society. When asked how to deal with organisations pursuing quite contested projects NANGOF's chairperson smiled and said those organisations should be held accountable through their internal governance system and through donor evaluation of their performance. Remarkably he did not mention peer pressure as

## *Meetings as meetings*

Error consists in seeing what is not there, and not seeing what is there.  
D.H. Lawrence

The last section argued that meetings were arenas where people enact and display solidarity, hierarchy and commitment. This was surely an important function of meetings, but Namibian civil society is very small and people have plenty of other occasions to meet and negotiate their relationships, especially as most activists had been working in the sector for a long time. It is thus questionable whether people attended meetings for the sake of interpersonal relations. Helen Schwartzman (1989) argued that meetings fulfil a number of social roles for their participants. Her ethnographic account of meetings in a mental health institution demonstrates how meetings provided staff with an opportunity to make sense of their interpersonal relations by drawing together what would otherwise remain disparate actions and talk (1989:9). In her argument meetings were good to see organisational values as they clearly embodied the institution's dominant forms of interactions and relations. Meetings' form and content displayed and challenged hierarchies, bonds and conflicts between management and workers and between staff and the organisation. Schwartzman's ethnography took the analysis of meetings beyond the purely functionalist explanations of meetings when she proposed to use meetings as central unit of analysis instead of looking at meetings as one manifestation of small group dynamics, decision making in organisation or specific speech acts in organisational communication. However, her account is still based on the assumption that meetings reveal some concealed truth about organisations and that the real reasons why people attend meetings lie outside meetings.

Assuming that the meetings' real aims remained hidden and were only indirectly addressed remains speculation. In the end all explanations of meetings as something else, be it as rituals (Peck, Gulliver/Towell 2004), speech acts (Myers

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mechanism to check on the organisation's conduct. Interview Chairman of the NANGOF Board of Trustees/NANGOF 10/06/2008

1986), communicative events (Hymes 1974) and arenas for social relations (Schwartzman 1989; Owens/Suttons 2001) run the risk of error in D.H. Lawrence's sense, because none of my informants ever saw meetings as anything other than meetings.

I therefore propose to pay more attention to what meetings actually do and how people create links between them. As Eric Wolf stated "how do we get from viewing organization as product or outcome to understanding organization as process? For a start, we could do worse than [...] look at "the flow of action," to ask what is going on, why it is going on, who engages in it, with whom, when, and how often." (1990:591). The following section argues that the key to understanding meetings in Namibian civil society might lie in what seemed their most paradoxical features: that they were mostly about protocol issues when they were supposed to address "substantial" questions and that they produced above all one thing: more meetings.

### *The "Hope-generating machine"*

Running the risk of stating the obvious I suggest to see a meeting as a concrete event where participants do things: they leave their offices, talk to their peers, make notes, they may even give a presentation. Meetings are immediate, i.e. happen at a fixed time and place; they produce evidence in form of minutes and reports and they are different from office work. The change between settings - the office and the meeting room - creates an impetus in the daily routine and might provide activists with the motivation to carry on. The Directors' Forum was established as opportunity for managers to break away from their offices and reflect on common issues. The Sector Working Groups were also set up as arenas for people working on similar topics to come together and reflect on common priorities away from their everyday project work. Meetings were thus frequently presented as opportunities to "break-away" from the routine office work to reflect on common issues and find fresh approaches to widespread problems.

Interestingly, the mismatch between high expectations and poor outcomes of meetings was part of the impetus meetings provided. The disparity perpetuated the hope that things might change and that the next meeting would deliver better results

than the previous one.<sup>148</sup> The high number of follow-ups point to this continued deferral of hope. The SWG Education's decision to have a special workshop on the reports expressed the hope that participants were able to produce demonstrable results at their next meeting. The sequence of meetings was thus what Monique Nujiten (2003:16) called a "hope-generating machine" as it constantly moved the accomplishment of goals to the next meeting and by doing so created ever new possibilities for the fulfilment of goals. Nujiten's ethnographic account of the interaction between a peasant community in Mexico and the institutions of the central state has shown how Mexican agrarian bureaucracy continuously fosters hope in peasants by ever deferring decisions and by giving the impression that cases will be resolved when in fact they are always just postponed. In a similar way meetings hardly forsake cases and people could pursue and hope to fulfil their ideas over the course of many consecutive meetings. Meetings were especially powerful "hope-generating" machines amongst NGOs, because participants often felt the pressure to be seen as doing something and to live up to the popular image of civil society as the embodiment of activism.<sup>149</sup>

### *Meetings as paper tigers*

Paper was so important in all committees, conferences, workshops and task forces, because it provided the central link between meetings. Participants in a meeting referred to their previous meeting through the adoption of its minutes and to the next through the "thinking about the way forward" item on the agenda, which usually turned out to be a discussion about the next get-together. Agendas were thus an integral part of the hope-generating function of meetings. After a particular meeting had ended people could go back to its minutes, write resolutions and press statements as the main evidence of organisational action (Schwartzman 1989: 40). That was the reason why formalities often seemed to be more important than the actual topic of the meeting.

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148 See Ernst Bloch's description of hope as the "not yet" (Bloch 1986 cited in Kelly 2009:12).

149 As David Lichterman observed: "We think of activists as storming barricades, lying down in roads, confronting police. But just as frequently, activists discuss." (Lichterman 1998: 403).

The SWG Education decision to concentrate on the donor reports is an example for the important role of paper as basis for action. In the first meeting nobody could have read the reports and the SWG could not have concentrated on them because they were about particularly important issues in education. They were simply taken up because they were a concrete objective people could act on. In the following workshop it became clear that only the two people giving a presentation had read the report and the discussion thus remained superficial. Eventually the group decided to send delegates to the governmental Education Councils and comment on the reports through them. These comments, it was agreed, should be discussed in another meeting.

People relied heavily on protocol issues to structure meetings and to pretend that meetings without preparation made sense. At the Consultative Conference attendees demanded the preliminary minutes on the second day to have a written proof of their own resolutions and actions. Considerable part of every meeting went into the discussion of paper, be it the minutes of the previous meetings, the agenda of the current one or the plan for the following.

Meetings were hardly organised as immediate response to an external occasion but resulted from decisions in other meetings. Meetings therefore had few immediate links to their environment and did not need any; everything outside the meeting was merely a background before which the sovereign system of consecutive meetings unfolded.<sup>150</sup> The succession of meetings was a self-referential system, concerned about and driven by internal factors as the next section will show. Seeing the sequence of meetings as an internally closed system explains why meetings produced above all one thing: more meetings.

### *The autopoietic system*

Meetings are elements of what Niklas Luhman called an “autopoietic system” (auto=self poiein= produce). In autopoietic systems different elements of the system interact to reproduce its elements (Seidl/Becker 2005: 25). The system itself depends

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150 In a similar argument Annelise Riles shows that there is no outside to “network” of women’s organisations in Fiji (Riles 2000:171).

on the constant reproduction of its elements, once the production stops the system disappears.

Meetings produce further meetings. The Consultative Conference in interaction with the Advisory committee “produced” consultations throughout the country. The SWG Education with the following workshop decided to have a separate meeting to agree on the advocacy agenda and to organise meetings with other NGOs and students about educational policies; all SWG meetings together set up a special committee to look into civil society’s position in governmental advisory committees. The constant production of different consultations or committees shows that the autopoietic system relies on the constant reproduction of difference to continue. Its elements are about to vanish as soon as they have come about and must be replaced by different events.

Meetings are evanescent. They cannot be stored and the continuing dissolution of the system is in fact a necessary precondition for autopoietic reproduction. Minutes and written resolutions do not preserve the meetings themselves but their structure generating power. Minutes are not identical to meetings, but they show that meetings are capable of producing further meetings. The idealistic image of meetings as informal exchange and the fact that participants do not prepare for meetings and often do not fulfil their delegated tasks indicates that they treat events as self-contained units. The continuous deferrals provide the rationale for new meetings and thus for the reproduction of elements which cannot be stored.

Protocol issues establish the connection to other meetings and are given considerable attention, because elements of an autopoietic system are what Niklas Luhman called recursive interlacing operations (Seidl/Becker 2005:60). One element can only be understood in relation to what came before and what followed. Adopting minutes from previous meetings and agreeing on the agenda for the next one locates the singular meeting in a sequence of similar events, allocates it a particular place in the sequence of events and thus provides it with a purpose.

There will always be a need for another meeting because autopoietic reproduction reduces uncertainty but at the same time it generates new ambiguities.



Most attendees at SWG meetings wanted to find out what other organisations in the sector were doing. However, once people had introduced their organisations, the meeting's participants decided that they needed to know how representative this was for the sector and how this linked with policy making. They usually decided to establish a steering committee to do the necessary research and then report back to a follow up meeting before coordination could progress. The perpetual creation of hope, the feeling that another meeting was needed to finally clarify things, was the central impetus of the autopoietic system. The fact that meetings achieved very little coordination became the central drive to ever more meetings.

According to Luhman elements of autopoietic systems are seen as more or less meaningful but the system itself is never evaluated in these terms (Seidl/Becker 2005). The series of meetings around the partnership bill for example, or institutionalised structures like the sector working groups were judged to be more or less worthwhile. If people in civil society felt they had ceased to be relevant they abolished them, but they never questioned the very idea of having meetings. For example the NANGOF chairperson said in an interview that the umbrella needed to hold an internal discussion as to whether the themes of the SWG were still relevant as new issues like HIV had emerged since the SWG had been established. According to him, NANGOF members might have to redefine the themes and the modus operandi of sector working groups, but he did not question the idea that the best way to deal with new issues was improving coordination of civic activism.<sup>151</sup> Meetings were treated as given background for civic activism and holding meetings was therefore beyond question.<sup>152</sup>

Meetings did not have any immediate connection to the issues they were called for. They did not alleviate poverty, decrease the HIV infection rate or broaden people's access to the law, and activists did not evaluate them according to these goals, but judged them according to their coordinating effects within civil society.

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151 Interview Chairman of the NANGOF Board of Trustees/NANGOF, Windhoek 10/06/2008.

152 Helen Schwartzman (1989:49) makes a similar point when she argues that meetings hardly feature in social science analysis, because they are so common in people's experience that nobody had thought about them as issue worth analysing. As Annelise Riles (2000:4) points out the methodological challenge in this is to analyse the knowledge practices in activities that are all too familiar to the theorist.

Meetings therefore did not speak immediately to problems in education, health care or social justice, only about them. The actual topics remained separate from the system of consecutive meetings and were not more than a background to the system's self-referentiality. In a self-referential system there is "no communication with the environment, only about the environment" (Rottleuthner 1989: 781). Similar to networkers in Riles' description, participants in meetings paid considerably greater attention to the interrelation of the system's components than they cared about the system's extension across space and time (Riles 2000: 51)

### *Conclusion*

In sum, meetings fulfilled a number of important functions in civil society which were related to but not identical with networking, coordinating and pooling expertise. In meetings people could enact and renegotiate their social relations, relations that were in fact much more contested than the oft-quoted "networking". Nominating delegates for example was always a clear statement about the prestige of particular activists in civil society. The "coordination" meetings provided publicly displayed the "single voice" within civil society. Meetings functioned as important mechanisms to define and control the proper conduct of civic activism and provided an opportunity to check and comment on organisations' conduct. Expertise was not so much produced as continually sought by moving decisions to the next meeting. These deferrals postponed the expectation to make truly informed decisions and continuously generated new meetings, thus reproducing the decisive elements of civil society coordination. Similar to documentation, coordination thus demonstrates the basic tension between aspiration and reality of NGO work.

The sequence of meetings as autopoietic system shows that NGOs set their own agendas albeit in circumstances that were always shaped by external demands. They redefined civil society coordination as diligent administration of meetings out of their own accord. However, in doing so they reiterated general ideas about the importance of the right procedure for accountability and transparency. These ideas were often moulded in civil society's relation to other sectors, a relation the thesis will explore in more depth over the coming three chapters.

## Chapter 5: Relations to the Government

It is Monday morning in early May 2008, the new NANGOF is hardly a year old and today the Capacity Building Officers start their employment. The offices are still in a state of chaos, unopened boxes with computer equipment pile in one corner and the desks have just arrived the Friday before. In this situation nobody has thought to provide a proper induction so the Executive Director just starts on an impromptu tour of the shared building interwoven with little anecdotes about the organizations working in it. When the little delegation has almost done its rounds and arrives at the last room, the director says this is the NANGOF Boardroom, a rather grand title for small room dominated by one huge table with a few chairs tucked in the corner and a dying palm tree next to the too small window. It is called the Boardroom, because the NANGOF Board meets here once every quarter. She is finished with her guiding tour but then just as an afterthought, she adds that the Board is the government of NANGOF and the chairperson, the “Head of State”. It is only half-jokingly that she invokes the image of NANGOF as republic, after all the Board members are all elected and the chairperson, as the official head of NANGOF, is the organization’s public face. In her simile the secretariat is the bureaucracy, employed rather than elected and responsible for the day-to-day administration and with a much lower public profile.

On the one hand the comparison was just a filler in the guided tour and the joke was to round up the short induction, but on a second thought the (self-) image of a civil society organization as state is striking, especially when this organization carries the NON governmental in its name. It made me reconsider the exact relation between civil society organizations and the Namibian government and I started to wonder whether the literature has not overestimated the distinction between NGOs and the state. William Fisher observed that the literature applied the NGO label to such various organisation that it seemed to describe “everything a government is not” (1997:444).<sup>153</sup> While the difference from the state is often the only common denominator for a range of organizations in the literature, the division might not be so important for NGOs’ self image.

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<sup>153</sup> See also Mercer 2002.

During my time at NANGOF I realised that non-governmental organizations were closely linked with governmental agencies in their everyday practices. A high number of joint workshops, mixed committees and government tenders taken by NGOs were a clear indication for an ongoing close collaboration between the two sectors.<sup>154</sup> This cooperation existed alongside serious contestations between civil society and government agencies around particular issues. For instance, the AIDS Law Unit at the Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) has worked closely with the Ministry of Health and Social Services to publish a rights charter for people living with HIV/AIDS, but they also took a sub division of the same ministry to court over several cases of alleged forced sterilization of HIV positive people. Sister Namibia, a feminist NGO, has recently published a report on child labour in Namibia, which was commissioned by the ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. However, the directors of the same organizations fought a long court case against the Ministry of Home Affairs to achieve recognition of same sex relationships as grounds for permanent residency in the country. The multiplicity of simultaneous links between government and civil society questions whether it is really helpful to ask how far NGOs are “in” or “out” of the policy making process (Lewis/ Opukuh- Mensah 2006).

But how can we make sense of these multiple relations between the two sectors in Namibia? The literature on state- NGO relations in Africa has often represented particular links between the state and civil society as the result of careful calculation on both sides. John Farrington et al (1993) argued that it can be beneficial for NGOs to cooperate with state institutions to access more resources and coordinate their activities more efficiently than they would be able to do on their own. States on the other hand are said to tolerate NGOs if their presence means an increase in international aid and/or their presence is in other ways economically beneficial for governments (Sen 1999). By contrast Michael Bratton has shown that states tolerate NGOs irrespective of economic benefits from civil society. In his argument strong states tend to be much more accommodating towards NGOs whereas insecure governments try to limit civil society’s influence. It is thus state’s political security,

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154 It is difficult to give exact numbers of those joint events, but hardly a day went by at NANGOF without an incoming invitation for a governmental conference or workshop. The section attempts to give an impression of the sheer number and the wide variety of more or less institutionalized forums.

rather than its economic calculus, that decides whether NGOs are allowed to operate unhindered or not. Whereas these accounts tried to find particular factors for a seemingly unchanging relation between states and NGOs, ethnographic description of state- NGO relations demonstrated that link between sectors far more dynamic, and that both sides change in emphasising cooperation or contestation according to context (Kelsall/Igoe 2005).

Sara Rich Dorman (2005) shows how competing claims of national NGOs and the government of Zimbabwe to represent the people's voice in the country's constitutional referendum resulted in a change from close cooperation between state and NGOs to civil society's exclusion from governmental projects. Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle (2005) by contrast gives an example of the reverse dynamics: the increasing intertwinement of party and NGO politics in the run-up to the 2002 presidential elections in Kenya. Stephen Jackson 2005 shows how state and non state spheres have merged in Eastern DR Congo when NGO activists took on quasi governmental duties in the absence of any recognisable state.

In a similar way the chapter shows that governmental –civil society relations in Namibia changed according to context. However in contrast to other accounts it shows how the relations between weak and strong NGOs shaped the sector's relations to the government and the ways in which relations were shaped by dominant perceptions on both sides, above all by the tension between dominant ideas of the two sectors as separate and the multiple de facto interactions between them. The chapter starts by giving a background to NGO- government relations in Namibia before looking in detail at examples of cooperation, externally driven links, contestation and disengagement. By giving examples of all these relations the chapter seeks to tease out the reasons behind particular kinds of links. It closes by adding intangible but important factors like personal networks, reputation, spatial proximity and informal exchanges to explain why various NGOs engage more or less (intensively) with governmental institutions.

### *Civil Society – Government relations in Namibia*

As chapter 1 already set out, hardly any civic association existed during colonial rule. The few civic organizations that were founded in the 1980s towards the end of apartheid were neither accepted by the colonial regime nor fully endorsed by the liberation movement. The state had strict laws in place to curb freedom of movement and association and ensured that it was the only provider of education and social services as means to regulate “native affairs” and maintain minority rule. For the liberation movement SWAPO the political struggle was priority and it regarded civic associations geared towards bringing “development” with suspicion (Bauer 1998: 79; Geisler 2004: 145/6). Additionally SWAPO claimed to be the sole representative of the Namibian people and thought of any social association outside its rank and file as potential competition. The top leadership continuously stifled initiatives of younger members and did not encourage civic activism within Namibia. The ambivalent relationship between SWAPO and civil society organisations continued after independence.

Post liberation regimes are often said to maintain ambiguous relations to the non-governmental sector (Rich Dorman 2006). On the one hand civic organisations are widely believed to represent the grassroots and are thus an important source of legitimacy for any regime claiming to represent the people. This drive towards inclusion of NGOs is counterbalanced by the NGOs’ tendency for critical advocacy which governments often see as endangering their claim to be the sole representative of the people by questioning the ruling party’s carefully constructed image of national unity forged in the anticolonial struggle (Rich Dorman 2006, Höhn 2010). Post liberation regimes often tried to reconcile this ambiguity by tolerating NGOs in principle but requiring them to go through lengthy registration processes which could be used as lever to monitor or control the civic sector (Puplampu 2000). This is also true for Namibia where civil society organizations need to register with the state, a process that is decentralised, confusing and long. There is no single registering authority and civil society organizations need to register with different ministries depending on their legal status and their activities. As chapter one mentioned Namibian law distinguishes between Voluntary Organizations, Welfare Organisations, Trusts and Section 21 Companies. Voluntary Organizations fall under common law and are quite informal. They do not need to register but are usually

encouraged to seek association with a relevant governmental institution, e.g. organizations working on HIV/AIDS can seek affiliation with the semi-public AIDS coordinating committees and those working on education are encouraged to link with schools. Welfare Organizations are registered with the Ministry of Health and Social Services and Trusts have to file their legal documents with the Master of the High Court; Section 21 Companies are companies not for gain and register with the Ministry of Trade and Industry. All these different kinds of organization require different forms and procedures and for many people thinking about starting a civic association the very first decision about the legal frame is off-putting. NANGOF has published a 35 pages long manual to help organizations decided and go about registration (NANGOF December 2005), but potential founders still experience difficulties, very often because the relevant ministry does not have the necessary forms and refers them back to NANGOF or advises them to consult a lawyer.

Registration is a basic legal requirement for all Namibian organisations, which leaves ample room for all kinds of links between the sectors, ranging from no contact beyond the formal registration to close daily cooperation between NGOs and ministerial divisions. The following case studies also show how important it is to unpack the label “government”. The state is not a homogenous bloc, but it consists of a large bureaucracy divided into a high number of ministries, subdivisions and other administrative layers.<sup>155</sup> Joel Migdal (1994, 2001) has suggested seeing states not as free standing organisations but as multiple processes in society that lay claims to regulate people’s personal lives in distinct ways (2001: 15). He argues that states are sets of multiple practices based on various rules rather than homogenous blocs that resemble more or less closely Max Weber’s ideal state.

An NGO’s good links to one division does not mean cordial relations with the entire ministry, let alone with the whole national government. The considerable room for manoeuvre the legal process allows together with the multiple layers of bureaucracy that constitute “the government” mean that civil society organisations<sup>156</sup>

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155 For example from the 10 000 people working in health in Namibia only 3000 are doctors and nurses. The remaining 7000 are employed in administration (SEEN n.d.)

156 As chapter 1 already explained the thesis concentrates on case studies from a small number of organisations that are (arguably) representative of strong and well-connected NGOs in Namibia. The analysis presented here is therefore true for a particular kind of civil society organisation.

fulfil a number of roles vis-à-vis the government; they simultaneously monitor, advocate, help, criticize, collaborate and implement.

### *Cooperation*

This section looks at two examples of close governmental – civil society cooperation, the collaboration between NANGOF and the government's National Planning Commission (NPC) around poverty alleviation and the LAC's legal drafting. The examples are chosen, because they are well documented and commented upon by people working in NGOs and the legal drafting constitutes a grey area between the governmental and non-governmental in which an NGO took on governmental function.

### **Poverty Alleviation**

NANGOF closely followed the government's poverty alleviation programme from the second National Development Plan (2001/2-2005/6) onwards.<sup>157</sup> NANGOF organized several workshops in late 2000 to pool inputs from civil society organisations to the NDP 2. The final version of NDP 2 was published in May 2001 and included some of the recommendations. When the next development plan was drafted NANGOF again organized a series of events, it published a newsletter on poverty in Namibia and held a conference on poverty alleviation in April 2007. The umbrella explicitly invited government representatives to attend the conference and together find ways to maximise civil society's contribution to poverty alleviation.<sup>158</sup>

Improved cooperation with government on poverty alleviation was indeed a goal for people working in civil society. The NANGOF Trust chairperson said that government and NGOs needed to find areas where their work can be complementary

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157 The government started in 1996 to publish a national development plan every four years. The latest is NDP 3 which started in 2006/2007.

158 The title of the conference - "How can we make the national development planning process and various instruments and strategies more effective in reducing poverty in Namibia" - was broad enough to include government, and NANGOF invited a senior official from the NPC as keynote speaker (NANGOF April 2, 2007).



to achieve goals in poverty alleviation.<sup>159</sup> He was of the opinion that government now provided more space for civil society input, because NANGOF had been invited to the President's Office three times since its reconfiguration in the previous year, which was an unprecedented level of contact making from government's side. The chairperson thought that civil society needed to make more use of this space.<sup>160</sup> Others went even further and suggested a division of labour between government and civil society instead of "only" cooperation. The directors of the Namibia Nature Foundation and Project Hope both suggested that government concentrate on policy making and leave implementation to NGOs (Research Notes 9/07/ 2008; Interview Country Director Project Hope, Windhoek 12/06/2008).<sup>161</sup>

The three invitations to the president's office can indeed be read as sign of high-level interest in a closer cooperation with civil society.<sup>162</sup> In 2002 the government's National Poverty Reduction Strategy paper stated that:

The government efforts to improve co-ordination and partnership with NGOs include the formulation of a policy framework for NGOs and civil society, the establishment of an annual consultative forum for effective co-ordination, the establishment of a National Development Fund, the creation of an NGO and Civil Society data base and measures aimed at institutional capacity building.<sup>163</sup>

Cooperation between the two sectors on poverty alleviation was often supported by third parties, be it regional organisations or international donors. In the first half of 2008 the SADC Secretariat organised a regional conference on poverty alleviation. The "International Consultative Conference on Poverty and Development" was held in Mauritius in April 2008 and brought together all Heads of State of the region and a large number of civil society representatives. SADC paid for

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159 Interview Chairman of the NANGOF Board of Trustees/NANGOF, Windhoek 10/06/2008. He also expressed this opinion as official civil society representative at the annual Cabinet retreat in early 2008.

160 Interview Chairman of the NANGOF Board of Trustees, Windhoek 10/06/2008.

161 This division of labour is often reported from other African countries where governments are keen to encourage the service delivery of civil society. However, at the same time governments are often reported to discourage critical human rights organisations. See Susan Dicklitch (1998) for Uganda, Tim Kelsall (2005) and Jim Igoe (2005) for Tanzania, Erica Bornstein (2005) for Zimbabwe and Stephen Jackson (2005) for the Democratic Republic of Congo.

162 But some suspicion between the two sides remained. NANGOF's executive director disagreed with this interpretation and saw the invitations merely as trick to gain votes in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

163 GRN 2002: 75

two representatives of Namibia's civil society and organised a civil society preparatory conference in Johannesburg to consolidate the sectors input in the main conference. Some donors were also keen to see government-civil society cooperation on poverty-related projects. The Global Fund operated in funding rounds with one main recipient who was expected to issue tenders to local organizations. The main recipient of the last funding round was the Ministry of Health and Social Services which in turn contracted a number of governmental and non-governmental agencies to deliver services to poor and particularly vulnerable communities. Just before I left Namibia news reached NANGOF that the main recipient for the upcoming Global Fund Round was NANASO, the non-governmental umbrella for HIV/AIDS service organizations. In that case NANASO would issue tenders and ministerial subdivisions could apply, flipping the current relation round.

The example shows that external incentives were important in bringing about cooperation between civil society and the government because these incentives provide opportunities and funding for collaborative projects. However the mutual will to work together was still vital, visible in the government's acknowledgement of civil society's role in poverty alleviation and NANGOF's signal to government through joint events with the NPC. Civil society organisations were willing to cooperate with government, if they thought they could play a useful role in policy implementation or assumed they could do better than governmental agencies. The (self-) image of civil society organisations as the more effective deliverer of services was also important for another example of close cooperation, the LAC's legal drafting.

## **Legal Drafting**

The Namibian government often relied on few experienced human rights NGOs to help in policy formulation or even to draft entire policies and bills. The Gender Research and Advocacy Project (GR&AP) at the LAC drafted amongst others the bill for the Married Persons Equality Act, the Combating of Rape Bill, the regulations for The Combating of Domestic Violence Bill and the Children's Maintenance Act. The AIDS Law Unit at the same NGO drafted the National AIDS Policy and developed national HIV/AIDS workplace policies. The LAC's Land

section, together with the Ministry of Environment and Tourism and the Office of the Attorney-General, redrafted Namibia's environmental legislation amongst others the Environmental Management Bill and the Integrated Pollution Control and Waste Management Bill. It had its input into the Tourism Bill, the Aquaculture Bill, the Forestry Bill, the Fisheries Bill and the Environmental Investment Fund Bill.

Very often these drafts were consultancies and the LAC got paid for it. However, monetary compensation was only part of the motivation. The real reason for taking up the work was that staff thought they could do a better job than government, since they were motivated by the cause rather than governmental benefits. Assuming that there existed a straightforward relation between law and empowerment LAC staff often claimed that they could make the law work for people, because they were really committed to its empowering capacities. The Director of the LAC commented on a government consultant who took six months to formulate the six pages draft of the NGO partnership bill (see below) and said the people at the LAC would do the same job in a day (Research Notes 18/07/2008). Perceptions of being more effective also came from the self-image as being closer to the people who should benefit from the law and this was different from governmental employees who just sat in their offices (Research Notes 18/07/2008).<sup>164</sup> Staff at the LAC therefore thought that the only way to ensure that the law worked for people was to draft it themselves.<sup>165</sup>

Interestingly the LAC presented itself as the mouthpiece for communities vis-à-vis the government, but invested very little in its actual relation to recipients. Neither the LAC nor any other NGO researched extensively communities' ideas what should be done for them. A few years ago I joined an LAC team on a tour to 'consult the communities'. The LAC was running a campaign to change the old marriage act that prescribed that all marriages in the north of the country were automatically out of community of property. This regulation often left widows without any personal possessions, because the families of the deceased husband had the right to repossess

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164 In interviews people of LAC often said their work was so effective because they went out to talk to people (Interview Gender Unit Coordinator/Legal Assistance Centre September 2002; Interview social worker Juvenile Justice Project/Legal Assistance Centre August 2002; Interview Director /Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 18/07/2008). NANGOF's director criticised a donor agency for only talking to government about poverty alleviation when it was civil society organisations that were "out there" working with the people (Research Notes 03/07/2008).

165 See also James Ferguson's (1990) argument that NGOs very often cannot conceive of a solution to poverty alleviation outside their own engagement.

his land and livestock. The LAC had prepared an alternative bill that allowed all Namibians to choose between different marriage regimes. By the time the LAC team went out to ‘consult’ the communities the centre had already drafted the bill and needed evidence to back their claims that there was indeed a need for a legal reform. The questions the LAC team asked were highly directive and left no room for doubt about which answers they wanted to hear.<sup>166</sup>

In sum NGOs were willing to cooperate and even take on governmental functions if people at the organisation felt they could provide equal or even better services than the government. Cooperation was encouraged through external incentives, funding available for joint projects or regional cross-sectoral cooperation. But where NGOs thought their work made a substantial difference, the availability of funding was only side consideration.<sup>167</sup> However, donor funding could also be the decisive factor for joint projects. Some collaboration would have not been realised if substantial amount of money was not earmarked for them. Cooperation between civil society and government is therefore not always the outcome of their own choice. In fact the funding regime can be so rigid that civil society organisations and governmental institutions are wedged into cooperation without much room for manoeuvre, as the next section will show.

### *Externally driven cooperation: Civil Society, the state and Donors*

Donors supported civil society as an important partner for government (USAID 2004) and less explicitly as counterweight to the state.<sup>168</sup> In this description,

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166 In a similar way Harri Englund (2006: 101) showed that Malawian human rights NGOs represented “the community” as having a distinct problem for which NGO (education) provided the solution.

167 The LAC receives donor funding mostly for its research and training, policy drafting is not an explicit funding priority.

168 I asked one donor representative why his organisation supported a particular NGO. Instead of answering me directly he told me that they were also supporting a similar NGO in a neighbouring country, because there political parties were weak and this NGO was one of the strongest (unofficial) critic of the ruling party. I concluded from this that the support for the Namibian NGO had similar reasons. Interview Country Director Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Windhoek 01/12/2006.

donors were removed from the civil society - state equation.<sup>169</sup> However, ethnographic accounts on the state - civil society - donor triangle have shown how donor interventions have a direct impact on state – civil society relations. Jim Igoe (2005) showed how a donor driven project broadened state control in Tanzania's Barabai district. In his case study civil society helped to solicit consent to a governmental project and thus promoted the interests of the ruling elites. Claire Mercer (2003) has shown how the new emphasis on partnerships in international development involved some NGOs in the Tanzanian PRSP process. Arguably donors are increasingly keen to fund partnerships between civil society and the state (Agg 2006; Lavergne et al 2006; Mundy et al 2008; Rosenberg et al 2008; Robinson 1997; Wadell/Brown 1997). Relations between the three actors have thus changed from the parallel funding structures to increasingly intertwined networks.

The example of the EU grant below is an illustration of how donor requirements forged a collaboration between a civil society organisation and a governmental institution. It shows how the official trend to public-private partnerships created mutual obligations between government, donors and civil society. The government had to show visible efforts to include civil society more in public service delivery, the EU had to change its funding procedures to channel money to an NGO instead of to a state and NANGOF had to reconsider its relation to a government institution that acted now as donor.

### **The EC Grant<sup>170</sup>**

NANGOF was able to establish a full secretariat with the help of an EC grant of 1.6 Million Euros over three years. The EC had decided to fund NANGOF, because it estimated that a stronger civil society would contribute more meaningfully to the country's development and add value to future Namibia-EC Programmes. To

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169 Nitza Berkovitch and Neve Gordon (2008) argue that the main argument in the literature on donors, states and NGOs still assumes that the relations between them are linear and unidirectional (Donors → NGOs → State).

170 The official title of the local agency is the "Delegation of the European Commission to Namibia"; the donor is the European Commission. The source of the funding is part of the overall EU development assistance but is located in the Commission, that is the reason why I decided to use EC for the specific programme and EU for the general regulations.

release funds for civil society's capacity building, the Namibian government, NANGOF and the EC agreed to a programme which supported the core costs of NANGOF in a similar way as the EU supports governments. Due to EU requirements the programme had to involve a governmental agency and thus included the National Planning Commission (NPC).

In 2004 the EC invited NANGOF to submit a funding proposal for a civil society capacity building programme, which was followed by several rounds of consultations and redrafting during 2005. In 2006 the EC accepted the improved proposal, but it had to find new ways of using the procedures the EU had designed to fund governments. Additionally NANGOF still had to fulfil several preconditions before the money could be released. By mid- 2007 NANGOF had realized all criteria and Brussels approved the funding. The first instalment arrived in NANGOF's bank account in January 2008, four years after the initial invitation.

At the beginning of the programme NANGOF was sceptical towards NPC's involvement in the programme, because past experiences with a similar method had been not encouraging. In 2006 the EC attempted to channel some funds to civil society through the NPC. In this specific instance the planning commission issued a call for proposals for a participatory poverty reduction programme. However, the application requirements excluded a majority of civil society organisations by asking for a concept paper and a fully worked project proposal for the initial application. Those organizations that were finally chosen encountered difficulties in getting their contracts signed and receiving funding in time. This and a similar experience in the preceding year left NANGOF suspicious whether the NPC was really capable to channel funds effectively, as one report on the EC grant remarked "the will is there but the delivery is problematic" (One World Action 2007:13).

In Namibia, funding priorities of some donors have changed and now favour public-private partnerships and decentralization, both resulting in a decreased role of government and mounting pressures on government to contract out services to the private sector but also to civil society organizations (One World Action 2007). The Namibia-EC Country Strategy Paper and the National Indicative Programme 2008-2013 set aside 5 million Euros for non-state actors to present the central government

now as providing an 'enabling environment' for non state actors to operate. The EC-NANGOF grant seemed to confirm the argument that donors would release more funds if government made visible efforts to include civil society more in programmes.

The new funding paradigm has exerted considerable pressure on the Namibian government to include civil society in its projects, but government has also found ways to assert a gatekeeper function in the tripartite relation. The National Planning Commission was aware that the EC's assistance to civil society could only be realised with governmental involvement. The NPC has used small signposts to stress its gatekeeper function. For example, it insisted on being the first institution to sign any form related to the grant and the donor contacts the NPC with any queries regarding protocol issues. All meetings were held either at the National Planning Commission or the EC delegation, the parties never met at the NANGOF office, emphasising the fact that it was the government who was the principal partner of the EC.

In this particular grant, civil society, the state and the donor were closely bound together. The EC needed the NPC because it could not directly fund NANGOF as the EU only funds governments. The NPC could not receive the grant because the money was earmarked for civil society, NANGOF finally could not access the money directly and needed to maintain good relations with the gate-keeping NPC.

The example of the EC grant shows that funding regimes can compel government and civil society to partner up when neither side had originally the intention to do so. The new donor enthusiasm for partnerships might have been part of the reason why the government introduced a partnership policy to formalise its relations with civil society and is now keen to turn the policy into law.<sup>171</sup> However, civil society organisations were very sceptical about the partnership bill and suspicious about the reason behind it. The next section looks at this partnership process as an example of contested relations between government and civil society.

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171 Similar Acts exist already in other SADC countries. Zimbabwe has introduced a Private Voluntary Organizations Act in 1996, which gave government wide-ranging powers over organizations it regarded as deviating from its constitution. South Africa passed a Nonprofit organizations Act in 1997, which provided the blueprint for Namibia's partnership bill, including the idea of registering civic organizations centrally. However, the South African version included the possibility to appeal against non - or deregistration, an Article that is missing in the Namibian draft.

## *Contestation: The Partnership Bill*

This section looks at the history of the government's "Civic Organizations Partnership Policy", the bill it proposed and the reactions it triggered from civil society. It traces the civil society's reaction from the reluctant approval of the policy in previous years to the open rejection of the bill in the last round. It asks why civil society now rejected the policy and bill, despite their previously positive opinion and although civic organizations admitted that the actual text did not contain any obvious threats. It argues that the reaction was based on the deep fear of losing the current flexibility of the sectors' links. The end to this flexibility would force NGOs to choose one fixed role vis-à-vis the state and thus restrict their access to various sources of funding.

### **History of ( an unequal) Partnership**

The first time the government mentioned a comprehensive framework for its relation to civil society was in its draft NDP 2 in 2001. Shortly after it had received the draft, NANGOF organised a Working Group on the planned partnership policy. The group produced a discussion document and held a national workshop in March 2001, resulting in a position paper submitted to the Ministry of Finance. The discussion paper was included in the final version of the NDP 2. Later in the same year the Namibian Economic Policy Research Unit, an economic research institute close to government, was tasked with drafting the first version of the policy. At the time, in September 2001, NANGOF had already conducted a national workshop and civil society seemed to be well prepared to have a timely and meaningful input into the policy. When the NPC set up a steering committee to oversee the drafting process of the NGO policy, two representatives from civil society were included.

The NPC completed the first draft of the policy at the end of 2002, and in 2003 one NGO, the Forum For the Future took it up to solicit civil society's response to the first draft. At a national review workshop, the then director of the LAC cautioned that the policy could be used to control civil society. However, he also stressed the opportunity for civic organizations to use the new partnership arrangement to demand better inclusion in government programmes. The overall tenor of the meeting seemed



to have been critical appraisal. The participants expressed concerns about particular issues that were left out,<sup>172</sup> and did not follow government's argument that a new frame was essential - but they accepted the provisions of the policy and the new registration process, which was later seen as government's attempt to control civil society. The participants at this first workshop only asked for a common platform, which was later established in the form of an Advisory Committee.

In 2004 the National Planning Commission invited tenders to draft the policy, which was approved by Cabinet in December 2005. In 2004 NANGOF stated in a funding application that the policy was not intended to regulate civic organizations, but to harmonize their activities with the development efforts of the government.<sup>173</sup> The proposal suggested that NANGOF play a key role in realizing the policy's partnership through its capacity building project and through its code of conduct. In mid-2006 the NPC published the final version of the "Civic Organizations Partnership Policy" whose aim was to "create a partnership that works for the entire country, its citizens and their civic organizations and for the Government" (GRN 2005a: 10). The policy reviews the existing registration mechanisms for civil organizations and suggests a parallel registration with the NPC who should hold a database of all organizations working in the country. The overall aim of the database and registration at NPC was to provide government with a clearer picture of which organizations were operating in the country and to open opportunities for civic organizations to partner up with government on particular projects. The registration was voluntary but the policy promised a "clear advantages to those organizations that do voluntarily choose to register" (ibid: 13). However, the Registrar could refuse to list organizations or deregister them if they were seen as unaccountable (GRN 2005). The partnership was planned to become law through a Civic Organisations' Act whose bill was distributed through the NPC in 2007.

From 2005 to 2007, NANGOF was dissolved and reconstituted and with no overall organization coordinating civil society activities, the sector did not respond to

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172 Interestingly, the policy draft was mostly criticised for not addressing substantial issues like poverty or land distribution. The discussion five years later in contrast was all about procedures and did no longer mention poverty or land reform.

173 NANGOF 27 June 2004.

the partnership proposals. Only at the beginning of 2008 was a re-established NANGOF able to secure funding from the Ford Foundation to draft an alternative partnership paper. The umbrella promised to solicit input from a wide variety of civic organizations into its response to the governmental bill. By mid-2008 NANGOF had hosted a couple of events about the policy and draft bill where it was decided that further consultations throughout the country were necessary before the umbrella could instruct the civil society representatives on the advisory committee to speak on behalf of the sector.

### **The 2008 events: The Directors' Forum and the Consultative Conference**

The partnership bill was much discussed in all events NANGOF organized in the first six months of 2008 and two events were entirely dedicated to the bill, the Directors' Forum and the National Consultative Conference on the Partnership Bill. The "Directors Forum" was held in Windhoek in May 2008 and brought together a high number of heads of civic organizations. The four-hour Forum was intended as an exchange of opinions about the bill and to decide on the way forward. The plenary discussion at the beginning agreed quite quickly that the partnership bill was a veiled attempt by government to control the NGO sector and should be rejected. Participants felt that the entire rationale of the bill was so against the interests of civil society that even a substantial redrafting would not lead to an agreeable outcome. They criticized that the partnership bill did not talk about partners but registration, and rendered all powers to the government to grant or refuse registration, which it could use to gate-keep organizations' access to funding and recognition.

The national conference about a month later echoed the conclusions of the Directors' Forum. Like the Directors' Forum had done before, the conference called for an entirely new process with substantial civil society integration from the onset. Since both events had taken place in Windhoek, the participants asked the NANGOF Secretariat to organize similar events throughout the country to secure the input of organizations outside the capital, before the representatives on the partnership Advisory Committee could hand civil society's response to the government.

## Analysis

The rejection of the bill at the two forums is surprising, because the bill's major critical points were already included in the policy which was drafted with at least some input from civil society and which for almost three years had not triggered any fierce resistance. Surprising also were the claims that civil society had been left out of the entire policy drafting process. The history shows that the sector's input may have been erratic, ad hoc and far from systematically sought and rendered, but the track record of past consultations proves that civil society did have a say in the process. Claims of being left out often came from the same people who had sat in consultations and steering committees in previous years and back then, had agreed to the policy.<sup>174</sup>

It is startling that civil society remained long inactive on an issue it now claimed to be of vital importance. Nothing at the 2008 events pointed to the fact that there had been similar events around the same topic in previous years. Nor did participants mention these events during the discussion, and there was no written evidence of those consultations. There was thus no institutional memory to create a sense of coherence of the process and to remind participants of their previous opinions. Contradictions and repetitions occurred often over the years but also within the latest round of consultations. People could dwell on criticisms at length and remain completely silent about them in different forums. The NANGOF director agreed with civil society's criticism on the partnership bill during the conference, but supported the policy during a donor meeting at the NPC.<sup>175</sup>

Civil society representatives repeated the same arguments over and over again because they agreed so quickly that there was no real need for discussion and the plenary "debate" soon reached a dead end. During the national conference participants agreed that all the government was talking about in its "partnership" papers was regulation. However, the target of their critique, the "government", was absent from

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174 These were usually the few very well connected key actors in the closely-knit civil society network explained in chapter 2 on activists.

175 Research Notes 11/07/2008 and Interview Civil Society Help Desk Officer/ National Planning Commission, Windhoek 17/07/2008.

the forum. Despite the often-repeated commitment to dialogue expressed by both sides, the government and civil society remained strangely apart.

Why did the two sides remain so apart when both the policy and the bill were all about working together as partners? Why did civil society leave a gap of several years between the consultation rounds and only acted when the bill was already drafted? Why did participants claim to be left out when there was a clear track record of consultations and why did they change their opinion about the partnership policy from agreement to refusal. How could the same people both agree with and reject the bill at the same time in different forums?

### *Government and Civil society - partners apart*

Funding requirements and the idea of the primacy of internal consultations were the main reasons why the two sides hardly met to discuss how they should work together. NANGOF had to show to its members and its principal donors that it consulted a number of civil society organisations from around the country before it entered into dialogue with the government. The underlying idea was that civic organizations were closer to each other than they could be to any governmental institution. Civic organizations all belonged to the same sector and were assumed to share basic ideas and a common identity. However, it remained highly doubtful whether this was indeed the case. Many well-connected NGOs had a much closer working relationship with particular governmental institutions than with their rural peers. They also might have very different opinions about the dangers of cooptation than rural organizations. The NPC's Help Desk Officer suggested that it was especially rural organizations that would benefit from and thus support the partnership policy, because it would give them better access to funding opportunities. Stronger organizations, he argued, were afraid to lose their privileged positions and tried to block smaller organizations' access to funds.<sup>176</sup> It is quite doubtful whether strong organizations indeed pursued such an agenda, especially as their proven expertise and extensive networks provided them with secure positions in the government's tender books. However, rural organisations might feel more pressure to broaden their donor

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176 Interview Civil Society Help Desk Officer/ National Planning Commission, Windhoek 17/07/2008.

support and might thus be tempted to register with the NPC as the Help Desk Officer suggested.

The Help Desk Officer's opinion that strong organizations use their influence to guard their privileges shows a deep suspicion between the two sides. The government had set up the Help Desk at a time when civil society grew increasingly sceptical about the motives behind the bill and the new institution had a difficult start. However, the new officer did little to disperse these suspicions. He was present at both of civil society's partnership events, but hardly spoke then, and when I interviewed him he refused to acknowledge NGOs' worries about the bill's potential threats.

### **A new impetus**

Civil society's reaction to the bill only took shape after NANGOF had been re-launched, and the sector obviously needed an overall umbrella as a driving force. The previous grant for the Forum for the Future was a rare example where one member NGO had taken the initiative and applied for funding for a sector-wide project. This is extremely unusual and after the consultant had been paid and the workshop held, the Forum did not have the capacity to organize follow-ups. The lack of institutional memory may also explain why those who participated in consultations years ago now claimed civil society had been left out of the process. It is not the case that they had completely forgotten these events, but the lack of context to these workshops meant that the events remained isolated occasions and did not add up to a "proper" consultation.<sup>177</sup> The re-establishment of NANGOF was extremely important to create a sense of coherence in the sector. Participants at the Directors' Forum only decided to revive it because NANGOF again employed full time staff who could follow up on decisions. They said that without a NANGOF secretariat the Directors' Forum's decisions had been inconsequential and people had lost trust in the platform and left. It needed an umbrella to provide the necessary institutional memory, because organizations did not link the partnership process with their relations to ministries in

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<sup>177</sup> One director told me that the previous consultations had been patchy and more governmental window dressing than anything else. He said that only a few handpicked representatives from civil society were invited so that the government could say it had consulted the sector. Interview Director /Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 18/07/ 2008.

their other projects. To my knowledge no organization included the debate around the partnership policy in any of their project proposals or considered what the bill meant for its specific projects.

The possibility to have a coordinated position of civil society through NANGOF coincided with government's move to turn the policy into a law. The policy was only a guideline that could be ignored in everyday practice. With the prospects of the partnership as legally enforceable, civil society might have recognised the need to secure its input to the bill. The threat of an impending law might also explain why civil society organisations were much more cautious to approve of the partnership policy in 2008 than they had been a few years previously. They feared that the vague formulation of the bill's central provisions, like the powers of the registrar and the role of government in the partnership, could not be left undefined if they did not want to endanger civil society's independence. The critical tone of the recent events was also the outcome of the dynamics those events developed and the relative strength of critical versus conciliatory voices within them. At the workshop a few years ago the then director of the LAC presented a very benign interpretation of the policy. The LAC's current director in contrast strongly rejects the bill and given the high influence of the LAC in all legal matters the difference between the two might have been the crucial factor in tipping the balance between refusal and critical appraisal.

NANGOF's revival explains civil society's new impetus on the partnership process and the threat of an impending law accounts for the difference over time, but they do not explain how some individuals could entertain completely different positions at the same time. These differences were above all a consequence of the multiple links that connect civil society and government. NANGOF could present itself as essential mediator between government and civil society for the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) funding because NANGOF's relations with the government include the umbrella's official status as civil society's voice at the NPC. NANGOF could, however, equally present itself as stern critic of the bill to the Ford Foundation, because another function of the umbrella is to pool civil society's concerns about new legislation and to monitor governmental policies. Both functions belong to the authentic work of NANGOF. The difference results from the umbrella's

choice over which role to highlight. NANGOF's example shows that organizations can tap into different resources by presenting themselves in various functions, depending on their audience and the context. It is this flexibility that is most threatened with assigning a fixed identity to every organisation in a centralized resource allocation. Organizations would lose substantial amounts of support if they had to decide on one particular role in their relation to government. The example shows that civil society organisations were reluctant to partner with government if they feared that cooperation would restrict their flexibility and foreclose change in future relations. The example also demonstrates why this flexibility is so important for organisations. It allows organisations to stress different roles, and take up a more cooperative position on a contested issue, if this allows it to access resources.

### *Contestation or no-links? The debate around self regulation*

During the latest round of discussions of the partnership bill, civil society representatives came up with the idea of a self-regulation mechanism, because they felt that they could not reject the partnership bill without offering an alternative to it. As the last section showed, the overall opinion in the latest rounds of consultations was to do away with the partnership bill altogether and come up with an entirely different proposal to regulate government-civil society relations. One essential part of this alternative was seen to be self-regulation, a mechanism to establish and enforce good conduct within the sector. In the opinion of those at the Directors' Forum and at the national consultative conference, self-regulation was a direct response to the partnership bill and thus part of civil society's contested relations with government. But on a closer comparison the two documents talk about two different things entirely. Why did civil society representatives think of self-regulation an adequate response to the partnership bill, ignoring that there was no connection between the two mechanisms? This section argues that the drive towards self-regulation was as much about the proper conduct of civic activism as it was about the right relations with government.

At the national consultative conference, the morning session on the second day was entirely devoted to self-regulation. The chairperson of the NANGOF Trust gave a presentation which suggested a need for self-regulatory and enforcement

mechanisms.<sup>178</sup> Since government had justified the bill with the need for increased transparency, accessibility and accountability of civil society, the participants argued that self-regulations would undermine the rationale for the partnership bill.

### **NANGOF's Code of Conduct**

The proposed self-regulation mechanism uses NANGOF's Code of Conduct (CoC) as blueprint. It is a short piece, about six pages long, that each organization applying for NANGOF membership needs to sign. The Code has several short sections setting out standards of organisational management. It includes paragraphs on governance and the separation of elected and executive structures, on transparency, integrity, financial accountability, the management of human resources and the proper conduct of projects.<sup>179</sup> The Code of Conduct had been drafted independently of the partnership process and had never been mentioned in any of the partnership consultations before.

It is quite remarkable that participants spent an entire morning of a two-day partnership event on an issue that was not related to the policy at all. The argument that self-regulation would undermine government's justification for the partnership bill was never verified by any governmental institution. In fact the Help Desk Officer made it clear during an interview that the government would proceed with the partnership bill even if civil society established a self-regulatory mechanisms.<sup>180</sup>

This may come as no surprise, because the two documents talk about entirely different things. The partnership policy organises the relations between government and civil society. It does not attempt to regulate the inner workings of civic

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178 He argued that self-regulation would enhance civil society's "good corporate governance". The following plenary agreed with him and the discussion soon moved on to possible enforcement mechanisms. Some participants suggested to use controlling and a fining system similar to the one of the private sector. The private sector thus functioned as role model for self regulation and the discussion shows that civil society's relation to the private sector also varies according to context and NGO self image, an argument made in more detail in chapter 7.

179 Many of these paragraphs seem to regulate the work of strong and well-connected organizations as they presuppose enough resources to have separate governance structure, financial audits and enough staff to speak of "human resource management".

180 Interview Civil Society Help Desk Officer/ National Planning Commission, Windhoek 17/07/2008



organisations, manage inter-NGO relations or set standards of conduct within civil society. The first impression is therefore that the policy provides for less “intrusion” into civic organisations than the Code of Conduct.<sup>181</sup> By suggesting replacing the policy with the Code of Conduct civil society could have in fact opened itself to much closer scrutiny.

Why did the sector discuss an alternative to the partnership policy without even making sure that their proposal would influence government’s partnership plans? Even if this was the case, why did civil society propose a mechanism that appeared to be much more intrusive than the partnership policy? The reason mostly given was that self-regulation would be an effective means to fend off government’s thinly disguised attempts to control civil society through the partnership bill. Most probably these fears were the result of experience in mid-1990s when government had already tried to draft a partnership agreement, which at that time was seen by civil society as attempt of outright control. The current partnership document arguably leaves enough room for suspicion. During the conference the LAC director admitted that there was nothing threatening with the actual wording in the policy, but the reasons the policy gave for a partnership were plainly wrong. The claim that government did not know what civic organisations were doing contradicted the long-term relationships between the two sectors and government’s dishonesty about its reason for the partnership nurtured the suspicion that it pursued a hidden agenda (Research Notes 09/07/ 2008). The argument was understandable but it was still difficult to justify the outright rejection with a plain reading of the policy. There was no open attempt to control civil society and the enthusiasm for self-regulation without obvious attempts of external regulation seemed at least a bit odd.<sup>182</sup>

Self regulation did not only function as the often-cited self defence against government’s intrusion, it also said something about how civil society thought civic

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181 This impression might be deceptive though. Keeping the partnership standards vague could allow the NPC to claim that some organisations did not live up to them and to deregister them without having to explain what exactly was wrong.

182 This is especially true in the light of the latest development. In December 2008 an NPC delegation met with NANGOF representatives and officially acknowledged civil society’s concerns about the bill and the NPC’s Director General Katjavivi promised to stall the bill indefinitely. NANGOF email-news December 2008.

activism had to function. The Code of Conduct can be read as an attempt to regulate social activism and set rules for the conduct of conduct, the sector's governmentality. A large part of the discussion around enforcement was about surveillance, the proper reporting mechanisms and the umbrella's right to issue, and by implication to withhold, certificates of good conduct which justified NANGOF's inspection of civic organisations' inner workings.

As the chairperson of the NANGOF Trust put it, self-regulation was about creating a watchdog for the watchdogs, i.e. for civil society organisations. Other NGO leaders agreed and saw self-regulation as mechanism to increase the sector's coherence and "togetherness". The peer review of a self-regulation was seen as effective means to "pull us together"<sup>183</sup> and address the diversity of civil society that many saw as great strength but also as challenge (Research Notes 10/07/2008) especially when it was difficult to reach a common position on sector wide concerns.<sup>184</sup>

The Code of Conduct and the measures proposed to ensure that organisations adhered to it, were one more example of the sector's 'will to know' (Foucault 1979). Civic organisations were encouraged to share their reports and project feedbacks with NANGOF, so that the umbrella could know whether they indeed adhered to the Code of Conduct and also so that NANGOF could promote the work of its members better. At times demands for the enforcement of the CoC were unveiled attempts to control civic organisations and thus curb short-lived NGOs, which were seen as damaging the image of civil society in general. The Director of NANGOF hoped that self-regulation would give the umbrella the powers to issue and take away licence from civil society organisations if they did not adhere to the Code of Conduct (Research Notes 2/07/2008).<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Director 'Citizen for Accountable and Transparent Society', Windhoek 10/07/ 2008.

<sup>184</sup> Participants of the National Consultative Conference suspected that some NGOs would be more than happy to support the governmental initiative and would thus divide and weaken civil society's stance vis-à-vis the government.

<sup>185</sup> During a NANGOF staff meeting somebody suggested to ask the NPC to only acknowledge members of NANGOF as "proper" civil society organisations, because only they had signed the CoC. NANASO had asked similar a thing from the Ministry of Health and Social Service, but both governmental institutions refused to cooperate.

Relations to the government had thus a direct impact on inter-NGO relations and justified internally imposed checks on civic organisations' conduct, but it would be far fetched to argue that the attempts to regulate the conduct of conduct in civil society were part of an overall masterplan designed to bring about a preconceived notion of what civil society ought to be about.

Since Michel Foucault's seminal work (Burchell et al 1991) a lot has been written about governmentality, the mechanisms to institutionalise surveillance and regulate the conduct of conduct. The literature has used the concept of governmentality to examine how people turn into self governing subjects through institutions, discourses and through everyday practices. Governmentality became the overall term to denote all mechanisms that work on individuals to discipline themselves (Gupta/Ferguson 2002: 989). The literature on African politics has represented governmentality as directed, calculated and coherent system of policies. Governmentality as the rationality of government worked in such diverse fields as town planning, the privatisation of security (Robins 2002), in debates around ecological policies (Death 2006:412) or in IMF's structural adjustment programmes (Neu et al 2008). All these studies seem to suggest that in systems of governmentality the overall goal is clear from the start and determines the entire system. James Ferguson (2006) argues that governmentality is the government of the conduct of others justified by claims to superior spatial reach of the state (ibid:112) and he equals governmentality to governance (ibid:107) and sometimes even to government (ibid: 40) which represents it as distinctively purposeful enterprise.

In this representation governmentality is a means to direct human conduct that added up to a systematic technology of the self. However as Gavin Kendall and Mick Michael (2001) argue Foucault speaks of techniques rather than technology of the self, stressing the multiplicity of simultaneous, discrete and undirected interventions. As Foucault pointed out governmentality is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it contains complementarity and conflict between techniques through which the self is constructed or modified (Myers 2008:125). There is not one overall masterplan with a set outcome, but multiple and often conflicting acts bring about unintended and unforeseen outcomes.

Neither the umbrella nor any other strong NGO pursued a hidden agenda of controlling smaller civic organisations and justifying it with phoney threats. They initiated multiple smaller interventions which they carried out for their own concrete and very plausible reasons. Self regulation was presented as real alternative to the potentially more restrictive government regulation, attempts to avoid fly-by-night NGOs were to ensure the sector's reputation with international donors and secure continuing funding, and gathering information about civic activism was to promote the work of different NGOs.<sup>186</sup> None of these initiatives were particularly new but the “rediscovery” of the Code of Conduct was an example of how they all contributed to regulatory tendencies within civil society that emerged as response to a shared belief in external threats.

The Code of Conduct had been in place for years and every new NANGOF member had to confirm that they had read, understood and implemented it. However, the umbrella never attempted to enforce adherence. The Code had been drawn up by a consultant for NANGOF a few years earlier and sailed through the Board without any serious changes. The “draft” document quietly became the official NANGOF Code of Ethics without the wide consultations the umbrella had organised around the partnership documents. However, the Code has never really been enforced and there had not been any plans to do so in future. It was only with the threat of external control that organizations saw the need to establish a peer review mechanism.

The example of the debate around self-regulation shows that civil society could come up with a supposed response to the government without having a dialogue with it in the first place. Perceptions of an external threat provided the incentive, but internal motivations let the umbrella and strong NGOs team up to promote self-regulation. Self-regulation might have been debated at some time even without the partnership process. The reason why civil society discussed self-regulation at this particular point in time had only partly to do with government's partnership. The more important factor was NANGOF's regained strength and the perception that peer review could now be enforced.

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186 See chapter 7.

## **No links– The Labour Act Opt Out**

It remains debatable whether self-regulation was indeed somehow linked to the government's partnership policy or not, but it seems that quite a number of people in civil society really believed in the connection. A clearer example of a civil society project that remained strangely at odds with governmental law making was NANGOF's "response" to the new Labour Act. The Labour Act, passed in 2007, did not make any provisions for volunteers and NANGOF concluded that it did not recognize their status and required all organizations to pay their staff, employed or voluntary. This would have disastrous effects for civil society where an estimated 80 000 volunteers worked. The umbrella employed a Namibian labour consultant and used several international human resource volunteers to prepare an opt-out submission on behalf of civil society. This submission would allow civil society organizations to continue using volunteers without the need to pay them. After two years of preparation and shortly before finalizing the submission, the NANGOF volunteer charged with the task of completing the opt out learnt from a special advisor in the Ministry of Labour that the New Labour Act did not change the status of volunteers at all and that organizations could just continue using volunteers as they had under the old Labour Act. The misunderstanding showed how a patchy communication between a Ministry and an NGO resulted in a long pursuit of a project that lacked any substantial grounds.

After the debate about self regulation the Labour Act opt out was the second instance where civil society supposedly responded a bill but failed to check its relevance with the government. The Labour Act opt out was arguably a consultant driven project. The consultant has a good reputation as Labour Lawyer in Namibia and NANGOF followed his advice when it started preparing the opt out submission. In doing so the umbrella relied too heavily on the opinion of one expert and did not confirm the necessity for its project either with the Ministry of Labour or with the NGO most experienced in labour matters, the Labour Research and Resource Institute (LaRRI). The lack of communication between NANGOF and LaRRI shows that relations between particular civil society organisations were much more important for internal consultation than specific issues. Whereas NANGOF planned to outsource

the response to the partnership bill to the LAC, the Labour Act opt out had been taken on by NANGOF volunteers without ever having contacted LaRRI. Part of the reason might have also been that NANGOF charged mostly overseas volunteers with preparing the submission, all of whom were not experts in Namibian Labour law and were most probably not aware of the existence of a specialized NGO. The frequent change of the person responsible for the submission might have been the reason why the umbrella never established an institutionalized relation with the Ministry of Labour. The separation between the two sectors was then indeed not intentional but a side effect of the high turnover of volunteers at NANGOF.

Patchy communication, however, was not always accidental. At times one side decided to deliberately withhold information. In 2001 NANGOF acquired by chance a copy of the defence amendment bill and distributed it to Human Rights NGOs. However the Act was passed before civil society could respond and NANGOF protested against the “undemocratic and non-consultative manner in which the bill bulldozed through parliament.”<sup>187</sup> As the example shows the government would often chose the less confrontational strategy of withholding information from civil society to avoid the sector’s critique. However, occasionally a governmental representative would outright refuse to see civil society as partner. The MP Hage Geingob told one NGO director after the parliamentary elections in 2004<sup>188</sup> that government would not enter dialogue with civil society. SWAPO had just secured a mandate to rule the country for the coming five years and if he wanted to overthrow them he should contest in next elections in 5 years time! (Research Notes 11/07/2008).

The “Breaking the Wall of Silence” (BWS) committee has sought for years to get SWAPO to enter a dialogue about the fate of people who had disappeared at the hands of the liberation movement or were imprisoned by SWAPO during the war against the colonial regime (Leys/Saul 2003). The national coordinator of the BWS said they were never invited to the president’s office despite their repeated attempts to meet the head of state. Despite the frustrating experiences of the past decade the BWS

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<sup>187</sup> NANGOF September 2001:4

<sup>188</sup> Geingob was Namibia’s first Prime Minister from 1990 to 2002.

kept on trying to talk to the government. It emphasised that it regarded the government as partner and preferred dialogue to confrontation.<sup>189</sup> This careful approach stood in stark contrast to the NSHR's recent submission to the International Criminal Court, which accused ex-president Nujoma of gross human rights violations (NSHR 2006). The NSHR was heavily criticized for this move within civil society, especially as it did not seek contact to the victims' families and did not offer a dialogue with SWAPO as the BWS had done (Höhn 2010).

The BWS example shows that if government refused to cooperate with a civil society organisation, there was little the NGOs could do. Civil society organisations would also at times decide to withhold information, although their refusal was arguably never so consequential for the governmental counterpart. NANGOF had commissioned a directory of all the local donors giving to civil society in Namibia. The directory's part about funding for HIV/AIDS projects was paid for by the Ministry of Health and Social Services, but the rest of the book was commissioned by NANGOF alone for the benefit of civil society organisations. When the NPC and some regional Councillors heard about the directory they asked NANGOF to release the information so that it could benefit organisations working in their region or contacting the NPC about funding opportunities. At this point the NANGOF Board decided that the information was for NANGOF members only.

The Board members reasoned that government representatives would give out the information as their own and gain political advantages from it, which NANGOF did not want to support. A similar reason was given when the umbrella refused to share its database of civil society organisations with the NPC Help Desk. People said they did not have a problem with giving out the information, but they did not want to provide the help desk Officer with data so he could pretend he had done anything in the months since he had started work for the NPC when in fact he had just been sitting on his hands (Research Notes 21/07/ 2008).

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189 The National Coordinator of the BWS emphasized how important it is in this sensitive issue to acknowledge that also contemporary SWAPO supporters suffered during war and that calling SWAPO's leadership human rights abusers would add insult to injury. Interview, BWS national coordinator, Windhoek 21/05/ 2008.

In sum, the absence of links between government and civil society are more complex than they appear on first sight. They can be the result of one side consciously deciding not to communicate as the last examples showed. This was the case around controversial issues or when one side thought that sharing information would provide the receiver with an undue advantage. The example of the Labour Act opt out and the debate around civil society's self regulation show that unarticulated and unchecked assumptions about the other side's motives play a considerable role in bringing about a mismatch of projects. These assumptions remained largely unchecked for reasons having to do with the relations between civil society organisations rather than resulting from the specific relations between civil society and the government.

So far this chapter has shown that a whole range of factors interact to determine the exact relations between the sectors. However, these formal aspects cannot explain why some civil society organisations apparently partner more effectively with government than others. Why does "Women's Action for Development" have more opportunities to cooperate with ministries than the Rehoboth Development Forum? Why does the LAC have more input in governmental HIV policy making than the umbrella for AIDS service organisations? The remainder of the chapter will show that intangible factors like informal links, ad hoc opportunities and personal networks are crucial in explaining the differences between civic organisations' relations to government.

### *The importance of informal networks*

As chapter two has shown Namibia's civil society is rather small with a limited number of individuals having long worked in the sector. Strong personal networks connect people working in the same field across the sectors. Frequent phone calls, meetings at each other's events or on invitation of a third party, the occasional formal meetings like courtesy calls, or official visits weaved a closely meshed network of people in governmental subdivisions and NGO units. The importance of personal networks and acquaintances for government – civil society relations cannot be overestimated as they were often the channels through which



substantial parts of opportunities and resources flew. NANGOF's funding directory was paid for by the special programmes section of the Ministry of Health and Social Services (MoHSS), mostly because the programme officer in the Ministry and the then acting director of NANGOF knew each other very well and the job was given to NANGOF without a public tender, because only consultancies over 5000 Euros needed to be advertised. The long acquaintance meant that the MoHSS person as donor knew how the NANGOF director as recipient worked and could be confident that the project was realized in time and the comparably small amount of money well spent and accounted for.

People who have been employed in civil society and government for a long time were often on first name terms and many civil society activists maintained these relations after they had left the sector.<sup>190</sup> Very often people would move back and forth between government and civil society and thus span a network of close personal relations across the sectors through their individual careers. The current Help Desk Officer at the NPC had long been working for a developmental NGO and the chairperson of the NPC's partnership advisory committee had been employed by an environmental research NGO before. One NGO director told me that he constantly struggled to find new staff because his organisation was losing experienced employees to better paid positions in ministries all the time (Research Notes 18/07/2008).<sup>191</sup> The change from an NGO to government was by far the more frequent career step, but people occasionally would also move the other way: One of the new Capacity Building Officers at NANGOF left his position at the Ministry of Water and Agriculture, because he felt he could not develop his personal skills in the large bureaucracy of a ministry. These examples confirm the argument made by Nicolas Guilhot (2005) and Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth (2002) that careers spanning both sectors are an important factor in intertwining the governmental and non-governmental sphere.<sup>192</sup>

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190 A lawyer who had long been working for the LAC and now lectures at the university still uses the contacts from his NGO time to get consultancies (Research Notes 04/04/2008).

191 The fact that governmental positions are better paid, more secure and come with more benefits than employment in civil society is quite exceptional in Africa where high levels of donor funding often make NGOs the better career option compared to employment in cash striped state bureaucracy.

192 See also "Telling the activist story: from roots to routes" in chapter 2.

Personal acquaintances made it also more likely that a ministerial division and an NGO would turn to each other for ad hoc support and information. There is hardly any difference for the NANGOF secretariat between somebody calling from a ministry or from an NGO asking for information and the staff at the secretariat knew some people in government as well as people in other NGOs.<sup>193</sup> The first Capacity Building Officer at NANGOF spent an entire day of his first week at a new working group at Ministry of Labour. When NANGOF arranged for the second round of job interviews for its Capacity Building Officers there were not enough people to sit on the interview panel. During a staff meeting the director suggested to “borrow” somebody from the NPC, because she was sitting on NPC’s interview panels all the time and according to her it was high time that they returned the favour.

All these contacts were made ad hoc and avoided the formal channels of cooperation. However they would happen so often and were so time consuming that one day NANGOF’s director complained to the NPC that she was not employed by them and that she really needed to spend some time at NANGOF.<sup>194</sup>

The two sides needed to be physically close to each other to maintain (informal) relations and mutual help. This seems an obvious point to make, but one that is still often overlooked. Very often meetings would be rescheduled for the following day(s) on short notice and it often happened that the contact person was simply not in the office at the agreed time. It was crucial that people could come back within a few days to make up for the cancelled meeting.<sup>195</sup>

During my time at NANGOF there were several occasions when somebody from a rural organisation had arranged for a meeting with NANGOF’s director, but did not meet her because she had to leave the office unexpectedly before the meeting and nobody from the staff could say when she would return. All that was left to do was to return the following day or sometimes a few days later with the hope of meeting her then. One representative from a rural organisation had travelled all the

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193 It is difficult to give exact numbers but on an average working day at NANGOF three out of five faxes and phone calls inviting to workshops or other events came from a ministry.

194 Time and help are not always given entirely voluntarily. When governmental invitations piled up on the NANGOF’s director’s desk she complained that she felt she had to attend all those meetings and workshops, because if she declined once she would give government a reason to claim that the new NANGOF was not interested in a cooperation because it would not honour their invitations.

195 Cancellations on a short notice had often to do with multiple jobs of activists.

350km from his hometown to Windhoek to deliver his organisation's membership application in person to NANGOF and meet the new Executive Director. However, during the entire week he spent in the capital it was not possible to arrange a meeting with her or with anyone else from the NANGOF Council and he had to return without having spoken to any person in a management position at NANGOF. During a staff meeting a long term associate of NANGOF said he knew this person as a really committed activist who really wanted to advance his organisation's work. "But he will not get information, consultancies and invitations to workshops, because he sits there in Khorixas, in the middle of nowhere and is utterly detached from what is happening in Windhoek" (Research Notes 10/03 2008). Similarly NANGOF's director had arranged to meet with several heads of community-based organisations just before she flew to South Africa to attend a weeklong conference. But the evening before they were to meet it became clear that she had to fly earlier than expected and could not cancel the meeting in time. The leaders therefore only learnt about it when they came to the meeting. Since they could not wait over a week for the director to return they had to abandon the meeting altogether (Research Notes 18/02/ 2008).

A Windhoek-based office brings clear advantages in meeting people, attending events and building a strong network. People were painfully aware of the Windhoek bias of events, but it is difficult to change this in practice. NANGOF planned to hold its National Consultative Conference on the partnership bill in Otjiwarongo, a town about 300km north of the capital. The reason was to avoid the impression the umbrella would only hold its events in the capital. However, the secretariat anticipated that most participants would come from Windhoek and the costs of transporting and accommodating for the three-day conference were seen as too high so that in the end the Conference was held in Windhoek.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> It came as no surprise then that most participants were indeed from Windhoek and it is difficult to know where participants would have come from if the conference had been held outside Windhoek. But long distances between towns and sparse population density are undoubtedly an obstacle to any attempt in bringing a number of people together outside the capital. When a small NANGOF delegation toured the country to promote the Civil Society management Qualification, they spent two weeks driving to reach 100 people and thought this as rather high level of attendance

## *Conclusion*

In sum, government – civil society cooperation has multiple dimensions and underlying reasons, as do contestations between the two sectors, and non-communication.

A good reputation and self-image helped NGOs to seek influence with the government and foster political cooperation between the two sectors. Donor pressure and funding priorities for partnerships on the other hand tended to give rise to economic links, as joint projects were more profitable for both sectors than separate plans. Personal networks, informal collaboration and ad hoc information sharing finally established important relations between the two sectors. Boundaries between the different kinds of relations were permeable and often social relations paved the way for more formalised political relations or joint project proposals result in closer personal contacts. As the sub-headings indicate there was a continuum of relations, cooperation might have been more economic than political but it was never purely either economic or political and often it remained difficult to categorize a relation without doubt.

Contestations most often appeared around controversial issues. However it was often difficult to understand when exactly an issue became controversial. The case studies showed that an issue might become contested when it was perceived to restrict flexible relations between the sectors or when either side thought that information sharing would provide the other with an undue advantage. Besides cooperating with certain ministries and contesting governmental initiatives civil society would sometimes embark on projects that were strangely at odds with the governmental policies to which they were supposed to respond. In both examples there were motives driving the project forward that did not have anything to do with the links between the sectors - be it the ambition to regulate civil society's internal conduct or the consultant's interest in getting the project up and running.

The main reason why the two sectors remained apart was the dominant opinion in civil society, government and amongst donors that civil society and government were two separate sectors. Dominant ideas about the sectors as non-overlapping entities meant that NANGOF first consulted other civic organizations, before it talked to government about its proposed partnership policy. It also prevented

the umbrella from directly working with the Ministry of Labour on the new Labour Act. Civic organizations presented themselves as constituting a coherent sector and talked down their often close relations to government ministries and the fact that many NGOs maintained closer relations to government divisions than to other civic organizations. The dominant image of the two sectors as separate in fact meant that government and civil society remained apart even when the issue demanded cooperation.

Practices showed that often the same organization engaged in all links at once and that these multiple relations were far less easy to separate than activists often claimed. Different factors like NGOs' self image, their funding imperatives and above all their established personal networks to government agencies all shaped the distinct form of cross-sector relations. This was also the reason why civic organisations could entertain contradicting relations to governmental institutions at the same time, closely cooperating with one governmental institution and choosing to confront or disengage from another. Common interests, joint projects and long established personal contacts often meant that a number of NGOs were in fact closer to some government institutions than to their assumed "peers" in civil society. However, NGOs also felt the need to follow the protocol and consult with their peers first. This often led to basic tensions in the relation between the sectors and suggests to disaggregate the sectors and to regard the relation as continuum of in/decreasing closeness. Understanding civil society's relation with the government therefore demands investigating the context that shapes NGO action and their decision whether to contest or cooperate with governmental agencies, questions that the next chapter will explore in relation to civil society's links with donors.

## **Chapter 6 Friends, foes, funds**

Namibian independence in 1990 coincided with a steep increase in international funding for NGOs. The combination of new political freedoms and an unprecedented amount of available funding meant that civil society organisations mushroomed, a growth activists occasionally found detrimental for the quality of civic activism in the country. New funding was therefore not always seen as entirely positive. NGOs' funding experiences were arguably very particular in a strong state like Namibia, because civil society organisations faced high competition from strong governmental institutions and from a highly competitive private sector. Increased competition meant above all the stricter enforcement of standards in large grants whereas in weaker states donors often did not adhere to their own funding criteria and allocated aid according to very idiosyncratic criteria (Marriage 2006). Grant management was always a major subject for discussion in Namibian civil society wide events, because funding, or the lack of it, always had an immediate impact on what NGOs were able to do. Often NGO staff demanded that they should have more influence on the design of aid programmes because international aid (priorities) had such a profound impact on their work. But how exactly does aid influence NGO work? This chapter demonstrates that grant management, i.e. the application, administration and the end of funding, had a much wider impact on NGO projects than the much cited ideologies of donors or recipients.

NGOs often conveyed an image of civil society wide cooperation when they applied for funding. However this representation contradicted the usually fierce competition amongst civic organisations for available grants. NGOs often used strategies of tacit gate-keeping and excluded rival NGOs by withholding funding information. Attracting funding therefore did not only influence how organisations worked, but also shaped the ways in which they related to their peers. The chapter's second section shows how grant budgets defined NGO work priorities through the differentiated allocation of money. Organisations had to spend their entire budget in a given period of time and thus prioritised large budget items in their everyday work, because it took longer to spend more money. The termination of funding defined which plans NGOs envisioned for their future work, because it forced organisations to

make contested decisions over which kind of work to scale down or abandon completely. The chapter shows that tightening budgets let Namibian NGOs invest more in their image as experts and scale down the organisations' service delivery. However, these decisions were often contested and the widespread decline of funding in Namibian civil society thus resulted in a deep crisis of the sector that brought into the open contestations around priorities in civic activism.

The chapter's interest in the way in which funding shapes the daily work of NGOs fits with the thesis' general attempt to understand how development works; an interest that departs from the literature's concern to explain whether development worked. Development theory has long tried to discover the underlying reasons why international aid has not been able to live up to its ambitious goal to reduce global poverty (Easterley 2007).<sup>197</sup> Development has long been equated with economic growth. Corrupt recipient governments or bureaucratic donors (Easterley 2002) were represented as hindering the free market and as major obstacles for the efficient administration of development.

Ideas about the superiority of the free market translated into an increased interest in NGOs which were thought to be the more flexible and capable development alternative to states. NGOs were especially prominent when donors became increasingly disappointed with African states which they often blamed for the failure of the Structural Adjustment Programmes to boost economic growth in the 1980s (Lewis 2008). However, at the end of the 1990s it was clear that NGOs were not the "magic bullets" that automatically brought development to the poor (Edwards/Hulme 1996) and aid preferences swung back towards state support or mixed approaches.<sup>198</sup> Where the state was seen as too weak, corrupt or inefficient funds were channelled through NGOs but in strong states donors concentrated aid efforts on budget support and required NGOs to team up with state institutions in

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197 Modernization theory and dependency theory were the main competing explanations for (under)development in the literature. For a very short summary of the different development paradigms over the last 50 years see Easterley 2007; Rist 2002.

198 The Paris declaration in 2005 again promoted state support as main tool in international development (Naidoo 2003; Akbar Zaid 1999). However the recently prominent budget support for states ignores that it is still not very clear how foreign aid influences national economies (Bourguignon/Sundberg 2007, Easterley 2007; Kenny/Williams 2001; Mohan et al 2000; Mosse 2005; Uwin 2004). See also the debate between Burnside/Dollar and (2000) and Easterly/Levine/Roodman (2003).

public-private partnerships. Budget support and public-private partnerships have again diverted funds away from NGOs and this meant that civic organisations in Namibia had to work with considerably smaller budgets.

The literature on NGO funding has shown how new donor trends like budget support and the prioritisation of state or non-state actors have heavily influenced NGOs' room for manoeuvre and how donors' ideological orientations thus had profound impact on the way civil society organisations worked. As early as 1991 Adam Fowler argued that the specific tasks of southern NGOs were likely to remain dependent on the priorities in international aid (Fowler 1991). A few years later David Hulme and Michael Edwards summed up the disillusion with the emancipatory potential of NGOs when they argued that NGOs' continued dependence on international aid had resulted in a decline in their accountability, transparency, efficiency and grassroots connection (Hulme/Edwards 1997: 964). Specific case studies showed how donor agendas have continuously shaped the work and scope of southern NGOs. Mark Schuller (2007) argued that donors in the Caribbean structurally favour large local NGOs over smaller and upcoming grassroots organisations and thereby heavily influence the ways in which development projects are implemented in the region. Sarah Michael (2006) argued that NGOs in Tanzania, Senegal and Zimbabwe are systematically disempowered by international donors to define their own work priorities and are thus prevented from contributing meaningfully to development. Julie Hearn (2000) showed how international political aid to civil society in South Africa changed dominant perceptions of democracy from substantial to procedural aspects of democracy. A more recent study about international aid to NGOs in South Africa argued that donors' preference for state agencies has left many NGOs with no choice but to turn to contract work and fees for services as they had to fend for themselves (Mitlin/Bebbington/Hickey 2007: 1709). This ultimately resulted in a decline of social justice organisations and let NGOs to concentrate on specific service delivery projects. Anthony Bebbington (2005) study of agrarian NGOs in the Andes showed how the new focus on service delivery and pro-poor projects in Dutch development assistance meant that local NGOs had to scale down research and instead concentrated on service delivery only. Although some accounts have also pointed to NGOs' ability to gain more room for manoeuvre (Lewis 1997), the literature agrees that shifting donor priorities and new ideas in international



development always have concrete consequences for recipients. Some accounts in the literature have therefore argued that the voices from the South should have much more influence in the design of development programmes and that recipients should be given more room for manoeuvre to tailor development projects to their needs (Wallace et al 2006, Whitfield 2008). This would also avoid the situation of recipients having to twist their feedback to satisfy donor demands and would help to close the communication gap between Northern donors and southern recipients and thus contribute to mending the “broken aid chain” (Wallace et al 2006; Bornstein 2006; Whitfield 2008). This would not only provide the developmentalist state with a much needed protection of its economy (Chang 2002), it would also prevent donors from being fundamentally out of touch with recipients’ reality and force them to leave their fictitious “aidland” (Apthrope 2003). While it is generally accepted that aid has a profound impact on the way recipient agencies work, it is far less clear how exactly aid affects recipients. This chapter focuses on the consequences of aid for those who receive it and how the practices of funding, i.e. applying for and the management of grants together with the difficulties in coping with shrinking budgets, shape inter-organisational relations and daily civic activism.

Looking at how aid relations affected links between organizations questions the idea that recipients are one homogenous entity. A recent volume on the politics of aid (Whitfield 2008) differentiated between states’ ability to fend off intrusive development policies, but to my knowledge nothing similarly differentiated has been written about NGOs. This chapter shows that there were in fact huge differences between individual donor organisations and between recipient NGOs. They differed in their institutionalisation, in the amount of money they spent and received, in their flexibility and in their adherence to particular “aid fashions”. NGOs also differed considerably in their ability to secure new grants and in their funding experiences. While some NGOs could access large funds through open tenders, others only had access to much smaller but less competitive funds or had to enter partnership with Northern NGOs and adjust their own work to that of their partner NGO. Interviews with funding agencies showed that donors were not one homogenous group either. They did not necessarily adhere to the latest “fashion” in international aid and they differed considerably in their independence from and agreement with dominant ideas in international aid.

Acknowledging differences between organisations on both sides opens the possibility of looking at the concrete consequences of funding dependence for NGO practices. This chapter looks at how funding influences NGO practices and relations before, during and after the grant period with special attention to sensitive areas which were commonly enacted but hardly talked about: competition, spending pressure and NGO decline.

### *The funding cycle: applications*

Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to Namibia increased from 110.29 million US Dollars in 2003 to 149.98 Million US Dollars in 2009,<sup>199</sup> but tendencies in international aid to channel money to strong states and the concentration of funding in a few highly visible areas like HIV and natural conservation left many NGOs experiencing a steep decline in their funds. The overall sum of aid to Namibia is therefore not nearly as important as the way in which grants were allocated, in order to understand civil society funding. The importance of allocation patterns in foreign aid was clearly visible in the single largest and most recent funding schemes in Namibia; the “President’s Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief in Africa” (PEPFAR) and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), both run by the US government. The programmes promise a considerable influx of money into the country, but PEPFAR<sup>200</sup> funds only HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and care programs, mostly run by the Ministry of Health and Social Services which received the single biggest grant in 2007. The MCC was a 305 Million Dollar contract between the Namibian and the US government, designed as budget support. NGOs were only involved in the MCC consultation phase to identify priority areas, but the grant’s support for education, parks and infrastructure will entirely go to the state.

Large grants usually went to state institutions and civil society organisations had to rely on small grants schemes as regular sources of income. A study on funding

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199 OECD Development Statistics available at <http://stats.oecd.org/qwids/#?x=2&y=6&f=3:51,4:1,1:2,5:3,7:1&q=3:51+4:1+1:2+5:3+7:1+2:1,121+6:2003,2004,2005,2006,2007,2008.2009> (last accessed 28 April 2010).

200 PEPFAR provided \$24.5 million in 2004, more than \$42.5 in 2005, \$57.3 million in 2006, \$91.2 million in 2007 and nearly \$108.9 million in 2008.

for civil society organisations in southern Africa found that over 60% of HIV community based organisations (CBOs) obtained their funds from agencies that were open to fund small local civil society organisations (OSISA 2007). The findings were not only relevant for HIV organisations, because donors administering these small grants said that they would fund projects irrespective of the particular topic. They thought it more important that the project appeared to be durable and that the applying organisation had some relations with the donor agency or a proven track record of successful project management.<sup>201</sup> But small grants were not only allocated to organisations with few staff and small budgets. When asked about the main recipients of their grants, donor representatives often mentioned a number of strong NGOs who were also repeatedly successful bidders in open tenders. These NGOs therefore often competed with smaller organisations for small grants and arguably diverted vital resources from small organisations.

Interestingly, those NGOs that were capable of winning competitive tenders often criticised the small grants funds. Far from seeing them as opportunity to diversify civil society and open opportunities for weaker organisations, they complained that the decentralised form of aid would inject money into the wrong places and donors encouraged fly-by-night organisations with their short sighted distribution of easy money (Research Notes 11/02/2008; 10/07/2008). NANASO's network officer complained that the mushrooming of small HIV organisations was entirely donor driven and happened without any consideration as to what was needed, and how civic activism around HIV was best coordinated amongst AIDS service organisations.<sup>202</sup>

They saw that the support for smaller organisations as yet another fashion in international aid, ill-thought through and without the necessary long-term perspective to make aid intervention work. They argued that donors wavered in their support and acted according to fashions rather than in the best interest of recipients. In their

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201 Interview Country Representative USAID, Windhoek 23/11/2006; Interview Country Director Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Windhoek 09/11/2006; Interview Country Director Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Windhoek 1/12/2006; Interview NGO & HIV/Aids Programme Officer Delegation of the European Commission to Namibia Windhoek 13/11/2006; Interview Country Director GTZ Windhoek 6/11/2006

202 NANASO network coordinator 02/07/2008. This critique also implied a considerable criticism on smaller organisations which were portrayed as entirely donor driven. In this image most smaller CBOs lacked essential project management skills and just diverted vital resources from the "real" NGOs.

opinion it was thus vital for organisations that their leaders were skilled to “play” donors, to identify trends and tailor proposals accordingly.<sup>203</sup> This was the only way in which managers could ensure the survival of their organisations in uncertain times. Directors’ ability to tune in to the right aid discourse was a major criterion for their management skills and the organisation’s overall performance. In the opinion of NGO executives it was the particular skill of an NGO leader that made the difference between successful and shrinking organisations. Directors usually blamed the NGO management’s lack of leadership skills for organisational decline, but donors were also seen to be partly responsible for the inefficient management. According to NGO executives donors’ preference to have a local beneficiary in a leadership position did not take into account the person’s qualification and often led to the decline of the entire organisation. Qualification, not identity or ownership was therefore the most important criterion for NGO executives to judge their peers.<sup>204</sup> Very often statements about (in)proper leadership were the only times NGO leaders would comment on the performance of other organisations. Apart from this they would enact rather than spell out inter-organisational tensions including one important relation within civil society, competition.

### **The practice of competition**

Experiences of funding were highly diverse in Namibian civil society. A study of over 300 organisations working on HIV/AIDS in Namibia found that only 43 received international funds. Of the 43 only one organisation received funds more than 20 times, three NGOs were funded between ten and 20 times and twelve organisations only received one grant in the last six years (OSISIA 2007).<sup>205</sup> The reason for the high inequality was that funding was allocated through open tenders which were usually highly competitive and only NGOs with professional fundraisers and sufficient experience were successful. The gender unit at LAC employed a project officer who had been working as fundraiser for Amnesty International for years and

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203 Interview Country Director Project Hope, Windhoek 12/06/2008

204 This is an interesting contrast to trends of indigenisation in international NGOs where as Stephen Hopgood (2008) argues “being” rather than “knowing” has become the most important criterion to judge whether a person fits the job.

205 This shows the large gap between stronger and weaker organisations; only few NGOs could regularly access large grants whereas the majority of organisations had to rely on multiple smaller grants to survive and occasionally had no funding at all.

was thus highly skilled in drafting funding proposals. It was quite common for organisations with larger budgets to have a professional fundraiser who was tasked to identify new projects and maintain permanent contact with donors, whereas organisations with small budgets usually added fundraising to the job description of project coordinators.

Executives supported competition in principle as being good for democracy and project quality,<sup>206</sup> but they never talked about concrete experiences of inter-organisational competition. It seemed that civil society organisations had magically divided all social activism amongst them. In a rare exception NGO directors said that the old NANGOF brought about its own decline by competing with members for funds. NANGOF's competition was presented as breaching the tacit agreement that NANGOF was not to compete with its members for funds and the umbrella's decline was portrayed as the logical result of this illegitimate competition. Usually NGOs walked the fine line between the often evoked civil society wide solidarity and fierce competition for funds through gate-keeping, non-coordination and non-information. This way it was possible for organisations to compete de facto without having to acknowledge competition between them.

### **Gate-keeping and non information**

Strong and well-connected NGOs guarded their networks suspiciously and “forgot” to pass on vital funding information to others. From the beginning of 2009 NANGOF received a major grant from the European Commission. The grant was a direct result of the EU's acknowledgement that non-state actors were vital in stabilizing democracy and bringing about development (EC/ACP 2000).<sup>207</sup> However, very soon the EC realised that strengthening civil society would involve more than funding the umbrella, a decision that was partly due to NANGOF's inability to deliver results on its capacity building programme in time.<sup>208</sup> The EC delegation therefore invited civil society organisations to an initial meeting about possible direct grants to

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206 Research Notes 11/07/2008 and Interview Director /Legal Assistance Centre Windhoek 18/07/2008

207 See chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of the EC grant to NANGOF.

208 See chapter 2 on training in civil society.

individual NGOs. The invitation was sent to NANGOF as the EC's only partner in civil society with the instructions to pass it on to all interested organisations. However, NANGOF only sent the information to a few organisation and left out a particularly strong NGO with whom it had fallen out over election monitoring (Research Notes 06/06/2009). The NGO missed the crucial funding meeting with the EC and its director complained about the umbrella's gate-keeping policy and announced that the organisation would consequently leave NANGOF.

In a similar instance a strong NGO only invited selected colleagues to a funding meeting. When the Ford Foundation was planning to resume its funding for Namibian civil society organisations it used its long established links with the LAC to arrange an initial open meeting with interested NGOs. However, the LAC did not advertise this meeting broadly; it did not use any wider distribution list and did not even publish it on its own website. As a result only those NGOs attended who had either close links to the LAC or who had heard about the meeting by word of mouth (Research Notes 11/02/2008).

Similarly the US Embassy in Windhoek regularly invited a number of highly visible NGOs to a donor-civil society breakfast. Although the organisations did not have much influence on the list of guests, they also hardly reported what had been discussed. They never used civil society wide channels to distribute information and only mentioned the breakfast meeting in private conversations. It appears that civic organisations saw their contacts with donors as zero sum game, because information about workshops and other opportunities were often not passed on by organisations that were supposed to distribute relevant news. NANGOF's executive director complained that she did not want to pass workshop invitations to SWG lead organisations or sectoral umbrellas, because they would not distribute the information further and usually "the person answering the phone is the one who goes to the workshop, what a coincidence!" (Research Notes 15/03/2008)

The lack of communication between civic organisations about funding opportunities led NANGOF to publish a funding directory. The umbrella claimed the directory would address a major concern of especially the smaller and more remote organisations who felt they were out of touch with donor priorities and were unsure

how to plan fundable projects. However, once the data had been collected and information about funding was available, the umbrella's Board decided to make it only accessible to NANGOF's members. The reason was to provide organisations with an incentive to join the umbrella, but the decision de facto narrowed the circle of entitled organisations to those NANGOF members who maintained regular contact to the umbrella and were usually well connected to donors anyhow.

Access to and reputation in networks was vital for obtaining funding. As mentioned earlier most small grants schemes were more relaxed about feedback requirement but they usually demanded some track record of previous projects and often relied on peer evaluation through recommendation letters. As the examples of the EC grants, the Ford Foundation and the US embassy breakfast above showed personal ties and informal links often decided whether NGOs received information about new funding or invitations to important meetings. The SWG gender was the most cohesive of NANGOF's working groups. Its members were connected through long established links, and it was no coincidence that two of the major driving organisations are headed by a couple. The SWG gender was so very coherent partly because the group consisted of the same members over the years. Staff at the NANGOF secretariat suspected that this was so because the lead organisation had organised meetings for years and had only invited its own contacts. The new Capacity Building Officers and NANGOF therefore thought that one of their most complicated tasks was to walk the fine line between delivering to well-connected organisations who were at the centre of these coordination mechanisms and opening their networks to newcomers, without being seen as compromising some organisations' claim to leadership.

### **Non – cooperation**

Interestingly, even the Sector Working Group gender with its close ties between NGOs hardly had any cross-organisational projects. Gender-sensitive law reform, the project presented as its concern, was largely driven by the gender unit of the LAC which conducted occasional workshops for others and urged all to include legal perspective in their own projects. The organisations however did not design and implement a joint programme on law reform. Coordination of NGO activities was understood to mean allocating each organisation its particular space and avoiding

overlaps. One NGO director said that there was a political culture in Namibian civil society that “everyone was doing their own thing” without any attempt to plan joint projects (Research Notes 06/06/2009). Questioning the common practice of separate projects one NANGOF paper asked whether civil society would have better access to programmes through joint projects as opposed to individual action (NANGOF 25 January 2006). Coordination was presented as major concern of civil society and NANGOF’s sector working groups and most sectoral umbrellas were created to do just that.<sup>209</sup> However, coordination was solely seen as dividing work between organisations, never to facilitate joint projects. The umbrella for conservancy NGOs (NACSO) “coordinated” projects in Namibia by dividing the whole country into several zones with one regional lead organisation and one organisation as leader on particular topics like training, research and advocacy. Coordinating efforts sought to minimise competition by carving up civic activism rather than facilitating joint projects. However, the division of activism often did not work out, because organisations did often not pass on the necessary information and “coordinating” umbrellas could not divide civic activism accordingly. Directors often tried to present the non-cooperation as deliberate and enhancing efficiency by avoiding overlaps.<sup>210</sup> They hardly conceded that non-cooperation resulted from competing projects. It seems that the idea that civil society embodied ideals of questioning and critique was only applicable to the sector’s relation to the state and to the private sector and did not concern the relations between civic organisations.<sup>211</sup>

However, practices show that civic organisations did compete and intra-civil society relations were by far not as harmonious and naturally complementing as it was often portrayed by the NGO directors. During the years when NANGOF was without funding, the National Institute for Democracy (NID) took on several civil society-wide projects. The NID published a “guide to civil society” and its “civil society support programme” offered networking opportunities for civic organisations and redistributed funds to smaller organisations. All these activities were seen by the new

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<sup>209</sup> See also the section about coordination in chapter 4

<sup>210</sup> Interview Country Director Project Hope, Windhoek 12/06/2008; Interview Chairman of the NANGOF Board of Trustees/NANGOF, Windhoek 10/06/2008; Interview Coordinator, National Association of CBNRM Organisations, Windhoek 24/06/2008

<sup>211</sup> The literature has also been mostly silent about the competition between civic organisations and has mostly examined NGOs’ competition to private businesses (Sell/Prakash 2004; Esty 1998), international organisations or Northern NGOs (Smillie 1994).



NANGOF as the tasks of an umbrella and contestations about the NID's mandate came into the open when both organisations planned to head an election monitoring coalition for the November 2009 parliamentary elections. NANGOF's Democracy Sector Working Group had long planned to organise a monitoring coalition from civil society, but its lead organisation 'Citizens for an Accountable and Transparent Society' (CATS) submitted its funding proposal so late that it endangered the entire project. NANGOF risked to repeat the mistake of the "too little too late" action that had also endangered the monitoring mission during the previous election. While NANGOF/CATS were still planning, the NID teamed up with several other NGOs and filed a grant application for election monitoring with USAID. NID convinced the donor that it had the necessary networks and capacity to organise, train and deploy enough monitors to cover the entire elections and received the grant. When NANGOF heard about this the director of CATS complained that NID was taking over the work of the umbrella and demanded that NID should hand over the USAID money to NANGOF, in order to make it a civil society wide project. NID refused, but invited CATS/NANGOF to join the coalition under NID's leadership. However, the cooperation was called off shortly afterwards when the CATS director demanded to single-handedly publish the coalition's press releases.<sup>212</sup> With only a few months left before the election NANGOF could not organise a countrywide monitoring team. Instead it only released a post election statement together with the SADC-CNGO mission which had deployed 47 observers (NANGOF 18 December, 2009).

In another instance both organisations tried to promote management skills in civil society. Both organisations designed a programme, submitted to different donors, how to strengthen capacity in civic organisations; Both presented themselves as vital partners in strengthening the sector and both ran similar training elements on very similar topics. NANGOF received by far the larger grant and its project was therefore much more ambitious in breath and scope. However, the umbrella never tried to incorporate NID's expertise in its "national" civil society management qualification and never acknowledged NID's previous work in any of its grant applications. Instead the umbrella sought to undertake its own training needs survey

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212 It seems that the behaviour of CATS' director contributed considerably to the tense relations between the two organisations. She was one of the people in civil society generally regarded as "employee, not activist" as chapter 2 explains.

and trial runs of its modules. In turn the NID only approached NANGOF after it had secured its grant and suggested looking into the possibility of organising joint workshops. However, after the fallout between the organisations around election monitoring it became even less likely that they will collaborate on training.<sup>213</sup> The relations between NID and NANGOF were a rare occasion when competition was openly acknowledged and parallel projects were not presented as agreeable parcelling of civic activism. The case is so remarkable because competition in civil society for funding is high, but it is mostly ‘done’ rather than explicitly discussed. The case of gate-keeping organisations and the deteriorating relations between NID and NANGOF showed that funding considerably influenced inter-organisational relations and NGO’s internal practices. The next section shows that funding continued to influence NGOs’ daily work and inter-organisational relations even when an NGO had obtained funding.

### *Being funded*

Once an organisation secured funding, the project’s clock started ticking on spending. Especially larger grants posed a considerable logistical problem for NGOs to disburse the allocated money in a limited period of time.<sup>214</sup> Budgets were therefore not only a tool to account for funding, but they delineated NGO projects and determined priorities in organisational work. NGOs had to spend much more time and resources on larger budget items in order to ensure that the allocated money was spend at the end of the project. Budgets translated sums of money into NGO work priorities and limited the organisations’ ability to change projects once the grant had been approved, as NANGOF’s main grant shows.

### **The Programme Estimates**

The main grant that set NANGOF up again was the EC’s civil society capacity support programme which sought to strengthen NGOs’ contribution to poverty alleviation and to realise the commitment the EU had made in its Cotonou agreement

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213 A close cooperation had been unlikely from the beginning, because the NID remains highly critical of NANGOF’s plan to charge organisations for the training (Research Notes 06/06/2009).

214 Similarly, donors are also under considerable pressure to spend. Maurizio Carbone (2008) shows how the European Commission acts under the constant pressure to show that it can spend money quickly and effectively.

(Dearden n.d.; European Commission 2002). The EC budgets were called “programme estimates” (PEs) and NANGOF’s first PE provided the umbrella with a start-up grant before the project’s proper implementation began with PE2 running from 1 May 2008 to 30 April 2009.

The case study shows that a grant dictated what an NGO could be working on during the project period. Since organisations were not allowed to over- or under-spend on any item, the budget identified priority areas through the allocation of money. Since it took longer and required more effort to spend more money, the budget translated sums of money into time spent on particular agenda items and thus what had to be given priority in NANGOF’s everyday work. Budgets therefore became statements about what civic activism ought to be about. The two programme estimates prioritised two areas for NANGOF’s activities, “participatory development” and “improved governance within civil society”. Both areas aimed at regulating the conduct of civil society organisations through standardised training and qualifications.<sup>215</sup> The budget did not only include the training itself but the entire process leading towards them, a study of training needs in civil society, employing a consultant to design the modules, the training of trainers and finally the organisation of the workshops. All these activities meant that the process was very long and as the chapter on activists already argued, the Civil Society Management Qualification took almost two years to be implemented.<sup>216</sup> When NANGOF finally received the first instalment of its three year grant from the EC, the umbrella had to quickly issue calls for tenders and job advertisements, because the process took so long that it hardly fitted the three months period of the first instalment. Consultancies especially took so long with their calls for tenders, application rounds, short-listing, interviews, appointments and briefing meetings that NANGOF had to pay its consultants before they submitted any work, because the money had to be spent. Throughout the entire period several NANGOF volunteers and a considerable part of the umbrella’s resources were occupied with these workshops. The budgets’ focus on workshops and training of civic organisations indicated in the grant that NANGOF was the trainer

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<sup>215</sup> See chapter 2 on activists.

<sup>216</sup> That was the reason why the NID was so disillusioned with NANGOF’s training and said that people at the umbrella were just sitting on their hands while the NID was actually delivering the training.

and assessor of its members and the project presupposed hierarchical relations of control. The PE's were not only based on these relations, they actively encouraged them. The budgets translated the 'greater role for NANGOF in a democratic civil society' into workshops to promote the umbrella in the regions, into more surveys on civic activism and into more money for Sector Working Groups to "coordinate" civic activities.

Misunderstandings about the budget often also pointed to fundamental disparities between donors and showed that grant makers had very different ideas about how their money should be spent. One misunderstanding between NANGOF and the EC concerned the roles of external consultants and permanent NANGOF staff. Many budget items on PE1 and 2 were consultancies, because NANGOF had assumed that the EC, like the UN, preferred this way of outsourcing. However, the discussions for the PE2 made it clear that the EC thought that this was NOT the way to organise civic activism.<sup>217</sup> This misunderstanding shows that even the sub-group of large donors disagreed on how to spend grant money. Similarly, small grant makers like the German Foundations and the small grants funds of the embassies often differed considerably on how best to administer grants. The country representative for the 'Friedrich Ebert Stiftung' said that Scandinavian donors were too trusting in giving money to little known organisations and were surprised when funds were not accounted for. He also said that his Foundation worked differently from the 'Konrad Adenauer Stiftung' which supported strong and efficient NGOs "whose only problem was that they were entirely white".<sup>218</sup> The various funding regimes showed that donors were a heterogeneous group and NANGOF's assumption that different grant-makers followed a single method to allocate funding was simply wrong.

The second misunderstanding illustrates how budgets constrain the room for manoeuvre if projects are not going according to a funding plan. It concerned the lack of 'fit' between the original budget and the actual sums spent. NANGOF did not spend the grant's entire sum in the first three months and had to find ways to deal

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217 Fears of corruption and clandestine allocation of tenders to friends and family did not seem to have played an important part in this EC's requirement. In fact the procedures for ensuring transparency in the allocation of tenders were so detailed that hardly any consultancy could be finalised in the allocated time.

218 Interview Country Director Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Windhoek 1/12/2006.

with unspent funds. NANGOF staff thought they needed to apply for a de-commitment of funds when in fact any unspent money was automatically allocated to the next budget before the EU reclaimed the money 2 years later. NANGOF did not know about this and applied to extend PE1 for six weeks in order to spend the money on outstanding budget items. The misunderstanding around the de-commitment created a number of problems for NANGOF. The umbrella needed to find additional funds in PE 1 to pay its staff for an additional 6 weeks, because it could not combine budget lines from PE1 and 2. The extension therefore addressed the problem of unspent funds but created new ones in areas where NANGOF's spending had been on target. There is a limited scope for the redistributing funds between budget items and spending must be kept under the same (sub)heading. The Executive Director had to be paid for six more weeks from the original salaries budget in PE1, because her pay could not be generated from postponing other activities. Differences between money applied for and actual spending had considerable impact on the entire budget. Necessary reshuffling of funds often meant that money was taken from posts that were on target which then became under-funded. That is the reason why NGOs tried to avoid budget over- or under-spending at all costs. NANGOF never allocated more than 300, 000N\$ (30,000 Euro) to any single budget item, because any spending over this threshold would require an international tender according to EU regulations. International tenders however would lengthen the process considerably and make it highly unlikely that the funds could be spent before the end of the budget period. Organisations either had to use funds for their stated purposes or had to justify any changes in spending.<sup>219</sup> Directors often complained that donors employed double standards in handling of funds because they wasted money on expensive workshops and conferences but threatened to cut NGO's budget if the organisation could not justify even small expenses.<sup>220</sup>

Grant management was a central activity of NANGOF and the organisation maintained almost daily contact with its main donor. The exchanges were often short and concerned mostly clarifications about terms and procedures, informal progress reports, feedback and meetings with third parties. Calls from the EC's NGO

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219 See the budget examples in chapter 3.

220 Interview Country Director Project Hope Windhoek 12/06/2008; Interview Director /Legal Assistance Centre Windhoek 18/07/ 2008.

programme advisor always had priority for NANGOF's executive director. Frequent and informal exchanges were made possible by the short distance between donor and NGO offices in Windhoek. Meetings could be arranged on a short notice and NANGOF's director could easily drop off or pick up documents.<sup>221</sup> Maintaining close contact was considerably more difficult with the Ford Foundation which funded NANGOF's response to the government's civil society partnership project, described in the previous chapter. The Ford Foundation's office was in Johannesburg and although papers were turned around fairly quickly between Ford and NANGOF the spatial distance resulted in a relation that remained somehow aloof. In fact the Ford Foundation had to ask NANGOF whether it was at all interested in receiving the grant, after the umbrella had not reacted to its initial invitation for two months. Once NANGOF decided to apply for the grant, fulfilling the Foundation's requirements took up a large share of NANGOF's administrator's time. The Ford Foundations demanded, amongst other things, a separate bank account, but the Namibian banks asked all 16 Trustees to sign the application. In the long period it took to gather the signatures NANGOF found it difficult to explain to Ford representatives why it took so long to open a bank account in Namibia.

Budgets structured NGOs' daily work throughout the entire funding period. The scale of particular budget items defined how long NGOs worked on them and donors' different rules for over- and underspending delineated NGOs' room for manoeuvre. The specific ways funding structured NGO work priorities shows that grant management remained a continuous concern and structured relations between donor and recipient NGO. Close relations to main donors were vital for any NGO, because donors differed considerably in their rules and in their expectations how grant money ought to be spent.

### *The end of funding*

International funding usually took the form of project based grants. This meant that any grant was allocated for a specific purpose and only for the period of a

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221 When I first tried to make contact with NANGOF I obtained the interim director's phone number from somebody at the EC after I had unsuccessfully tried to find him through several NGOs whose directors sat on the NANGOF Board (Research Notes 24/10/ 2007).

particular project. Previously, donors had supported an entire organisation over an agreed period irrespective of its projects. The new 'project based funding' regime meant that organisations had to continuously look for new funding while their projects were still running, in order to ensure organisational survival, and finalising any project also implied the danger of running out of funds. Activists often complained that it had become more and more difficult to secure new funding once projects had come to an end. Donors and NGOs differed about underlying reasons for the funding decline in civil society. Donors saw the lack of capacity within civil society as single most important factor explaining the withdrawal of funds. NGOs, on the other hand, doubted whether this was the real reason behind the decline. They pointed to the many initiatives to strengthen project cycle management and proposal writing skills which indicated that problems of capacity were not new to Namibian civil society. The annual report of NEPRU in 1997 had already mentioned problems of recruiting and holding qualified staff.<sup>222</sup> NGO staff pointed out that donors had for a long time employed formal requirements to evaluate NGOs' performance. The question that troubled them was why these factors had now become so decisive for donors in justifying the termination of support.

Decreasing funds did not only affect organisations with small budgets and no professional fundraiser. Although those organisations were arguably the first victims of the funding decline, shrinking budgets were also a problem for NGOs with large budgets and highly qualified staff. The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) shrank from 7 to 2 employees between 2002 and 2006, the Legal Assistance Centre had to close down 2 of its former 5 project units with one of remaining unit only staffed with one employee, and the National Economic Policy Research Unit (NEPRU) listed 19 researchers in its annual report for 2002/2003 whereas currently it only employs 9 fulltime researchers (NEPRU 2003).

Since strong NGOs also experienced a considerable decline, activists doubted that funding really decreased because civil society organisations lacked qualified staff. They explained the waning support as reflecting international aid preferences for state agencies over NGOs (Research Notes 09/11/2006) and recognised that the

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222 South African NGOs have experienced similar problems. See Habib/ Taylor (1999); Pieterse (1997) and Tjonneland, (2004).

principled support for the non-governmental sector that they had taken for granted in the years after independence was no longer available. The decreasing support for NGOs in Namibia revealed a deep gap between aid practices of scaling down civil society in stable democracies and models of democratic consolidation (Diamond 1999; Bratton 1994) which claim that a strong civil society is vital to ensure a country's democracy. Larry Diamond argued that civil society's main function is to maintain and strengthen existing democracies, because it is essential in providing public scrutiny of democratic governments and contain their power by holding them accountable and by checking potential violations of the law (Diamond 1999:7).

Donors and NGOs blamed each other for being most responsible for the funding decline. Donors argued that civil society's capacity was too weak to justify continuing support, NGOs argued that donors changed their priorities according to the latest funding trend and thus brought about the decrease in civil society's funding. In fact only both trends combined can explain the recent funding plunge in civil society. Civil society's (perceived) lack of capacity became a much more decisive factor because the state had returned as an equally legitimate aid recipient. The funding crisis provides insights into the relations between organisations and their donors. The organisations' coping strategies showed how NGOs sought to balance commercial work and civic activism, and saw the two as different aspects of an increasingly common NGO reality. Lastly, declining funds required a number of organisations to scale down their activities and close parts of the organisation. The decisions which units to close demonstrated which activities employees saw as core work of their NGO and of civil society in general, and illustrated how NGO executives justified difficult and contested management decisions.<sup>223</sup>

### *The consequences of the funding decline*

The shift of funding away from civil society organisations deeply affected the relations between NGOs and their donors. Donors and NGOs had used different

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223 It differs from the common literature on funding for NGOs in Africa which has focused on their rise, their relations to state agencies and their donors and how civil society actors capitalised on emerging international opportunities (Cameron 2001; Igoe 2006; 2003; Clarke 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998).



levers, accountability versus authenticity, to advance their position in a contested conversation about the real needs and constraints of aid in Namibia. With decreasing funds for Namibian civil society, NGOs and donors did not use particularly new arguments to assert their position, but differed more openly about aid priorities in the country. Donors started to use formal criteria like the quality of proposals and written feedback to justify cuts in funding to NGOs. The donors insisted that NGOs were themselves to blame for their decline which brought considerable tension into the relations. Donors also pointed to their own constraints and stressed the importance of being accountable to an increasingly critical public in their home countries. At times, donors seemed to suggest that NGOs showed insufficient understanding of the dilemmas that came with being answerable to an electorate.<sup>224</sup> They therefore used the older criticism of NGOs as non-elected and non-accountable to a general public. NGOs complained that they felt disempowered and had no real influence on what was funded, because donors “build and kill NGOs” with only minimal consideration for what was actually needed in the country.<sup>225</sup> They accused donors of not listening to the experts in NGOs and forcing civic organisations to produce glossy reports instead of concentrating on their “proper” work, a false prioritisation that had been criticised in international development for a long time. NGOs thus re-iterated the widespread criticism of international donors as blind to local particularities (Hobart 1993; Neumann 1997; Stirrat 2008). They ignored, however, that donors in Namibia were bound by the decisions of the National Planning Commission, the governmental agency to identify aid priorities and streamline developmental efforts in the country. Donors were therefore hardly in a position to dictate the agenda, but were obliged under the decisions of the regular NPC developmental meetings which both donors and NGOs attended (Research Notes 03/07/2008).

Contestations between NGOs and their donors therefore showed that relations between the two sides were not as completely asymmetrical as the literature portrays. Arguments that donors systematically disempower NGOs (Dicklitch 2003; Michael 2006; Schuller 2007) tend to neglect the bargaining power of NGOs in these relations. It was certainly easier for donors to justify the withdrawal of funding than for NGOs to close the resulting gaps in their budgets, and both sides occupied very different

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224 Interview Country Representative USAID Windhoek 24/11/2006.

225 Interview Country Director Project Hope Windhoek 12/06/2008.

positions in the overall power relations in international aid. However, NGOs had their own resources in negotiating the agenda, including the general acknowledgement that a civil society was necessary in a stable democracy which meant that NGOs could use the threat to close down completely and considerably weaken civil society in Namibia, if their projects were not approved. With this argument NGOs hoped they could count on the donors' keen interest in keeping at least a certain number of NGOs alive. One donor representative told me that his organisation provided "emergency assistance" on an ad hoc basis to one Namibian NGO just to keep it open.<sup>226</sup> NGO-donor relations were not entirely dictated by one side, but resulted from the ongoing negotiations in which each side tried to capitalise on its perceived resources in the overall struggle for credibility. This contestation was surely not new to donor-NGO relations, nor was it particular to a situation of decreasing funds, but the disagreements and mutual criticisms came out much more clearly in times of shrinking budgets.

### **Coping strategies**

Coping strategies illustrated how organisations developed new projects, because in times of shrinking grants NGOs took extra care in developing their projects. NGO staff stated that they would abandon their NGO work altogether if their projects were no longer funded. However, they invested long hours and energy in finding out what could appeal to the international aid community before conceptualising new projects despite their claims that projects were designed independently of recent "fashions" in international aid. This is not to say that their final project proposals were not tailored in accordance with Namibian needs, but the process of project generating was more complex than NGOs often portrayed.

The gender advocacy unit at the Legal Assistance Centre, for instance, set up a domestic violence project at a time when a domestic rape bill was proposed in parliament. However, the new focus on violence also coincided with recent developments in international aid. Many international donors had stopped funding projects on the structural positioning of women after gender mainstreaming had been introduced. Additionally, the focus on rape could be connected to HIV/AIDS and thus to a topic that has received high levels of external assistance recently. Other NGOs

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226 Interview Country Director Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Windhoek 09/11/2006

also remodelled their projects to fit topics around HIV/AIDS. The ‘Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) had commissioned research work on the impact of HIV/AIDS (van Zyl 2003) and published a regular HIV/AIDS bulletin; and the ‘Namibian Economic Policy Research Unit’ (NEPRU has established an entire research area on HIV/AIDS and development in Namibia and Southern Africa. The HIV/AIDS prevalence in Namibia is one of the highest in the world<sup>227</sup> and research on the pandemic was thus clearly a local need. On the other hand, the topic received extraordinarily high amounts of international funding and the NGOs are painfully aware that some of their projects needed to be connected to the topic in order to get funding.

In the muddle of everyday work, neat distinctions between “committed” activism and profitable work could not be maintained. This became especially visible when funds were so scarce that the NGO was no longer in a position to decide freely where to spend resources and had to make painful decisions about how to divide human resources and time. NGO staff spent long hours doing commercial consultancies which they did not regard as their “proper” work. A focus group meeting about funding trends at the LAC discussed how the centre could attract more consultancy jobs whose pay could make up for declining donor money and fund the centres not-for-profit work (Research Notes 26/102006). Similarly, the heightened pressure from donors to scale up the management aspects of NGO work and improve on project proposals and feedback increased the load of duties, which NGO staff did not regard as “proper” work. NGO staff often spend entire days in donor organised workshops on how to improve on their management and reporting skills, but many donor agencies complained that the level of feedback reports had not substantially improved.

The tension here refers to the NGOs’ official commitment to improve on the quality of their reports and the actual practice of many employees to keep the usual reporting style. NGOs met donor demands by attending the workshop but these were not put into practice and these workshops hardly had any consequences for the reporting habits. Erica Bornstein (2006) has argued that the practice of delaying or intentionally producing low quality reports is some form “resistance”, but comments

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227 Family Health International (2007) ‘Country profiles - Namibia,’ available at: <http://www.fhi.org/eng/countryprofiles/namibia+main+page.htm>

from activists indicate rather that training was often not addressing their specific needs or that they could not implement their new knowledge because they had not the means to do so.<sup>228</sup> Some donor agencies therefore doubted that increasing the level of training to NGO staff would really address the problem of poor feedback and stopped organising capacity building workshops.<sup>229</sup>

## **Justifying difficult decisions**

No matter how up-to date funding proposals were and how much an NGO earned from consultancies, most NGOs had to scale down their activities and also occasionally close entire projects. Interestingly in times of waning support and intense competition, only the units with a strong research component survived while the service delivery units were closed down. NGOs concentrated on research – asserting their positions as experts in their respective fields of knowledge at the expense of providing training or advice to the Namibian public. The Legal Assistance Centre for example, cut down on legal advice to the public at headquarters level, closed down advisory offices outside of the capital and closed its legal education project; the Institute for Public Policy Research which has asserted its position as linchpin of national knowledge production by commissioning research work, abandoned making research papers available to schools as too costly; NEPRU, the organisation specialising in economic policy analysis, gave up providing economics training to learners at senior secondary schools. Both NGOs and donors acknowledged that cutting down on service provision was a hard choice but argued that it had become unavoidable with increasing difficulties in justifying funding for “intangible” goals like “awareness raising”.

It was easier for them to find funding for projects with a clear output like research reports. However, as chapter 2 already argued, most employees I interviewed at the LAC, the IPPR, NEPRU and NANGOF saw themselves as experts in their own field of research and presented their job as providing the necessary information to

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228 See chapter 2 on training and NANGOF June 2009.

229 Interview Country Representative USAID Windhoek 24/11/2006;

lobby for change. The increasing bias of strong NGOs towards research therefore reflected the organisations' self-image. Secondly, the decline led to changed internal dynamics within NGOs. Donors no longer provided funding to an entire NGO for a fixed period of time irrespective of its projects. This left each sub-unit within an NGO to secure its own funding and each project could only guarantee its survival as long as its distinct projects were running. The end of core funding led to a de facto split of many organisations into smaller sub-units which sometimes directly competed for funds. The LAC staff said that they needed to meet across units and find ways to bring in new funding through joint projects instead of competing with each other.<sup>230</sup> Which units survived was therefore much more a consequence of the technicalities of funding, like feedback and reporting requirements, rather than resulting from ideological decisions. Funding did not promote any particular ideology amongst NGOs nor was it necessarily based on a distinct worldview amongst donors. It had far-reaching consequences for the ways NGOs worked structuring their internal priorities and division of work.

Despite the increased competition activists were careful not to blame specific colleagues for the decline, and competition was again more practiced than talked about. Activists usually blamed donors, and unidentified fly-by-night organisations for the crisis. Activists therefore represented donors as dictating the terms of civic engagement and were prepared to give up their own agency in project designs. This way they avoided taking a clear position on difficult decisions within NGOs and in contestations around where the organisations were heading. When the LAC had to close down three of its five programmes the staff said the closing did not reflect the units' performance and productivity, but donors had changed their priorities and demanded the closure of units. The funding decline was nothing the LAC or the programme coordinators could do anything about.<sup>231</sup> Similarly "Project Hope" abandoned its project on people living with HIV/AIDS and focused on micro-credit schemes to OVC's caregivers, because they thought this focus was more likely to attract PEPFAR funding and was also promoted by the organisation's Headquarters. The decision therefore had nothing to do with the Namibian Project Hope and its

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230 Focus group interview Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 26/10/2006.

231 Research Notes Staff meeting Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek 11/09/2006.

previous work.<sup>232</sup> The director of the rainbow project presented the TRP shift from advocacy to service delivery as result of donor pressure and not as result of the organisation's previous work. In sum, NGOs justified important changes in project outlook and the end of programmes entirely with changed donor priority. It made it thus possible for NGO executives to distance themselves from decisions and saved them from saying whether they thought change was justified.

## *Conclusion*

This chapter argued that funding had a decisive influence on civil society's work, but did so mostly through its technicalities. Grant selection criteria, the administration of budgets and the structural consequences of declining resources all had a much more profound effect on NGOs than any overarching ideological project of donors had. The chapter's interest in how funding works in civil society therefore analysed how competition influenced inter-organizational relations, how grant management structured NGOs daily work and how the funding decline impacted on NGOs' internal discussions about priorities in and the purpose of civic activism.

The chapter adds to the existing literature on aid to non-state actors in Africa by looking at different aid relations. It does not focus primarily on donor – recipient or north-south relations, but through an interest in the links between and within recipient organizations by asking how different funding experiences shaped those relations. In this way, the chapter illustrated how development works, instead of evaluating whether it works (Mosse 2005: 8). It thus departs from an instrumentalist view on development which sees it either as tool for poverty alleviation or as mechanism for domination (Ferguson 1990). Disaggregating “development” into a number of discrete practices and relations challenges the view that “development” is a homogenous discourse that always works in particular ways, and always has distinct effects on its recipients.

The daily reality of fundraising often qualified NGO claims that their projects were not designed to fit the latest aid fashion. NGO concentrated on research at the expense of service delivery and community outreach. The common explanation that these projects had better chances of attracting funding shows that organisations paid

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232 Interview Country Director Project Hope Windhoek 12/06/2008.

close attention to trends in international aid, despite their claims not to do so. It also reveals that NGO projects were much more strongly influenced by considerations about what might be(come) fundable than considerations about what recipients demanded. As the next chapter will argue in greater depth, NGOs regarded only donors as having changing demands and conceptualised communities as passive receivers of civil society's welfare projects.

## Chapter 7 Civil Society Inc.

In times of declining funds, activists often thought that their organisations had to become more competitive to ensure organisational survival. They thus increasingly presented their own activities in the language of the free market with customers, products and selling strategies. By asking why activists felt the need to present their work in a business idiom this chapter examines civil society's relation to the private sector. It pays close attention to how exactly the two sectors related and shows that civil society organisations employed strategies and structures that are usually associated with dominant practices in private firms. They resembled private businesses in their everyday practices like marketization and branding. NGOs had also started to express inter-organisational relations in the language of the market, a trend which indicated an increasing commodification of the activist discourse. However, the civil society differed from the private sector above all in the structure of its target group. While private corporations targeted customers as main source of revenue, civil society organisations did not derive their income from their beneficiaries. Civil society's "clients" and customers were two separate entities with different demands on its services. The chapter shows that the division in civil society's clientele had far-reaching consequences for NGOs' economic activity. NGOs treated only donors as customers and regarded beneficiaries like corporate assets that could be used to advance the organisations' agendas.

This chapter's findings therefore point to a complex relation between the two sectors which extends beyond the question whether civil society is similar to or completely different from the private sector. Most of the literature on the relation between civil society and the private sector has reified this binary. On the one hand scholars stress the difference between the market and civil society. These accounts present the private sector as shaped by capitalist globalisation and the increasing power of multi-national corporations, and portray civil society as globalisation's counterforce that speaks truth to power (Kaldor 2003a).<sup>233</sup> Based on a triadic model of state, market and civil society as separate sectors (Howell/Pearce 2001:229), Mary Kaldor argues that the prime goal of civil society is to strengthen democratic

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233 However, Marlies Glasius (2005) warned rightfully against conflating the anti-globalisation protest with global civil society.



accountability in a context where global market forces have weakened national systems of holding decision makers to account (Kaldor 2003b:13). On the other hand, theories of new social movements have increasingly borrowed concepts from organisational sociology which analyses how private sector organisations work. New social movement theory has shown that NGOs resemble large corporations in their tendencies to bureaucratisation and professionalisation, as well as in their strategies to shift their targets and internal structures in order to adapt to their resource environments and to ensure organisational survival (Campbell 2005:41).<sup>234</sup> Additionally the literature on NGO branding and the marketization of activism seems to confirm that the boundaries between the sectors have become increasingly blurred (Laidler-Kylander/ Simonin 2009; Vestergaard 2008).<sup>235</sup>

Instead of asking whether civil society organisations were essentially different from, or identical with private firms, any understanding of the relation between sectors needs to ask how, where and why the two meet and when they diverge. A more complicating view on the relations also seems to mirror Namibian activists' own opinions about the links between the sectors. At times they pointed to the many similarities between managing a civil society organisation and running a private corporation. They emphasised the same strategies were used by NGO executives to ensure organisational survival as business managers employed to keep their corporations running. They saw themselves as Chief Executive Officers, sought to model their peer review mechanism on that of the private sector and argued that "business minds" were key to ensure civil society's success. However at other occasions activists emphasised the distinction between the sectors and claimed that NGOs differed in kind from firms, because the latter were only about making money whereas civic organisations followed a 'higher calling' and had a sustainable impact in society. Activists therefore used different values to set themselves apart from private sector employees. As David Graeber (2001) has argued, different values do not only show what people wish for, but they also carry normative assumptions about

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234 The extensive literature on trade unions has long identified the tendency amongst leaders in large organisations to increasingly separate themselves from the mass membership and to blur boundaries between trade union and private corporation. Drawing on insights from Olson (Olson/Kahkonen 2002: 27) they point out that unions, while deriving legitimacy from their mass membership, also have to exercise coercion to discourage free riding and keep the members in line (Harcourt/Wood 2004: 20).

235 It is interesting to note that all these scholars assume that the sectors are separate to begin with and have only recently converged.

what people ought to want. A pure economic understanding of value as quantifiable entity for people's aspirations cannot explain why different groups rank their goals in a particular order. Instead, allocating value shows what people consider to be most precious, often without recognising their own agency in producing this value.

This chapter starts by investigating the roots of the assumption that civil society and the private sector are different in the first place. It looks at how the relations between sectors developed as civil society became increasingly defined as sphere of ideas, rather than as relations of productions. This redefinition shifted civil society away from the private sector to become a distinct sphere in its contemporary definition. The second part then looks at what is actually similar between civil society organisations and private firms. It shows that larger NGOs used practices like reconnaissance, branding and marketing that are common in the private sector.<sup>236</sup> Civil society organisations did not only employ similar practices like firms, they also increasingly talked about their work in the language of the free market. NGOs presented themselves as service deliverers who were duly paid for their competitive services, instead of receiving "donations" based on charity. The chapter argues that these widely shared self images as 'non-governmental corporations' led activists turn to market based solutions when organisations encountered problems of legitimacy. It looks at NANGOF's persistent credibility crisis which did not seem to be solved through marketing as a number of activists had assumed. This chapter asks why. Assuming that NGOs function more and more like private sector corporations, should the solution to their problems not also be similar to the mechanisms firms used to overcome difficulties, i.e. market the organisations more widely?

This chapter argues that NANGOF lacked legitimacy amongst its members, because its "product" did not correspond with their demands. The umbrella advertised itself as democratising and empowering civil society without having asked whether civil society organisations thought that the sector needed more democracy and wanted to be empowered in this way. This not only shows an umbrella markedly out of touch

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236 Again, this points to the difference between well resourced large organisations that can afford a separate budget for self marketing and smaller CBOs, which struggle to cover their core costs. Organisations with larger budgets could employ a Marketing Coordinator or even a marketing manager (NANGOF August 2009).

with its membership base, it also made clear that NGOs and firms did differ. The most important difference was the composition of their respective “customers” (Oster 1995).<sup>237</sup> Civil society’s target group consisted of the organisations’ beneficiaries on the one hand and the revenue providers on the other, two groups that hardly overlapped. Civic organisations’ close links to, and dependence on donors meant that they were much more prepared to listen to donor demands than to beneficiaries’ requests. Organisations assumed that beneficiaries had unchanging and unaccomplishable demands that were not worth investigating. Instead of treating beneficiaries as customers, organisations made them part of their corporate identity and furnished them with needs that neatly fitted the NGOs’ expertise.

### *Civil society and the market*

The idea that civil society organisations resemble private businesses more and more is based on the belief that these two kinds of organisations were different to begin with, and is rooted in the assumption that civil society and the market were distinct spheres that hardly overlapped.

The contemporary separation between civil society and the economy is an invention of the last century, but it has informed most of present-day thinking about civil society in the global South. Contemporary political theory sees civil society as the third sector, separate from state and the economy. Its opposition to the state dates back to the mid-18th century, but its separation from the economy is much younger. Until the mid-20th century civil society was seen as the arena for individuals pursuing their economic interests. For Hegel, civil society was the free sphere of self subsistent individuals realising their material interests (Keane 1998:53). As Jefferey Alexander (1998) and Krishan Kumar (1993) have pointed out, Hegel and his contemporaries saw the market as benign and as capable of teaching the individual self discipline and responsibility necessary for the full realisation of citizenship. Civil society as the

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237 Sharon Oster (1995:75) lists a number of other differences that distinguish civic organisations from private corporations, for example their cooperative rather than competitive approach, the particular people working for civic organisations, and the importance of their mission. The chapter demonstrates that the complexity of NGOs customer base is the most important of those. As the chapter on funding has demonstrated, NGOs are as competitive as private corporations; the chapter on activists has argued that people applying for civil society jobs do not differ from job applicants in other sectors. The importance of organisational missions is difficult to assess and compare. The structural self-referentiality of many civil society practices, however, qualify the overtly enthusiastic claims about the deep impact of civic activism.

market was an essential tool to turn people into citizens and thus to counter despotism (Keane 1998). Civil society's educative functions were later lost in the writing of Marx that defined civil society as the realm of the selfish pursuit of private interests. Civil society regained its civilising function with de Tocqueville, but the most it could do was to control individualism; the art of association essential for citizenship was learnt in political society, a realm distinct from state and civil society-as-market (Ossewaarde 2006). The decisive semantic shift in the understanding of civil society occurs a century later in the writings of Antonio Gramsci. Political society becomes the coercive realm and its educative function is assigned to civil society. Civil society is redefined as realm of ideas instead of modes of production, separated from the market and arriving finally at the nowadays common distinction between state, economy and civil society. Gramsci redefines civil society as the realm of consensual leadership which is central to the production and maintenance of hegemony of one group over the entire society. The separation between civil society and the market still informs current understandings of the two as separate and sometimes even as contradictory spheres.<sup>238</sup> As Krishan Kumar (1993) has argued, most literature highlights the cultural institutions of the sector that are not directly related to market systems of commodity production and exchange.<sup>239</sup>

In practice the two sectors are more intertwined than is analytically acknowledged. Civil society is an integral part of the market economy and the 'non-profit' label defines civil society through a market principle. Civil society creates jobs, generates (re-distributed) income and thus contributes to the national GDP (Howell/Pearce 2001). John Keane (2003) demonstrated that civil society depends heavily on global market forces like telecommunication, money and transport to function. Scholars who reify the separation between market and civil society hardly take note of these practical intersections. NGO enthusiasts were negligent towards their own analytical ambiguity when they claimed that NGOs were different from private firms but so successful because they functioned according to principles of the

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238 The theoretical assumption that the two sectors are different inspired the literature on possible links between the two, for instance accounts of civil society – business partnerships in a globalised economy or texts on corporate social responsibility (Ashman 2001; Covey/Brown 2001; Gereffi et al 2001; Morris et al 2007; Wells 2001).

239 As chapter 1 argued civil society in Africa is often presented as sphere of political solidarity and community support rather than as location of economic activity and exchange.

free market. Praise for civil society's assumed diversity mirrors the liberal argument for diverse markets as inherent value of capitalism (Friedman 1962; Kay 2003). NGOs are assumed to have a lean administration with "private sector levels of cost control and efficiency" (Hulme/Edwards 1997: 6) making the comparison more directly. These supposed small bureaucracies are mainly credited to be responsible for NGOs' flexibility and their capacity to adapt to changing circumstances. Scholars have argued that decentralised activism is thought to be more efficient than centralised planning of large state bureaucracies, because many different organisations contribute much more efficiently to the overall goal than one larger entity could do (Fowler 1992; Korten 1987). This assumption mirrors a common idea about the advantages of deregulated markets. These markets are said to satisfy needs as they arise exactly through their lack of central regulation and planning (Kay 2003). These assumptions show how closely the picture the literature paints of NGOs, resembles the ideals of the free market.

In general the civil society literature compares NGOs to an idealised version of the market where firms are efficient, lean, decentralised and flexible. The sociology of markets employs a less romantic view and defines markets as socially constructed arenas for interaction that "include social spaces with repeated exchanges between buyers and sellers under a set of in/formal rules governing relations between competitors, suppliers and customers" (Fligstein/Dauter 2007:113). This does not sound very different from the definition of civil society as "arenas for contestations" (Howell/Pearce 2001:3). The step from the idealised version of markets as efficient and deregulated arenas to the acknowledgement of their social construction is analytically helpful because it allows seeing that markets are based on social conventions. It is social convention that determines what can be legitimately bought and sold by whom and how. The idea that markets are social constructions therefore helps to challenge the notion that there is something natural about market transactions. The problem with these definitions, however, is that they are so wide that they are too broad to offer any concrete analytical insights beyond the general point about the social construction of markets. Scholars on international NGOs often refuse to see the obvious links between civil society and the market. However, the definition of both sectors as arenas for contested negotiation of social relations does

not add analytical value either, as it suggests that the sectors are identical which forecloses any possibility to analyse how they relate.

Instead, appreciating that “markets” exist both as set of discrete practices and as an ideal type helps to differentiate various relations between civil society and the market. Actors in civil society and the private sector employed similar sets of practices that did not belong exclusively to one sector, but activists also compared their work with an idealised version of the market that portrayed the private sector as flexible and efficient or mercenary and cruel depending on context. Activists therefore maintained very different links to “the market” in their everyday practices, and in the way they talked about it. Any understanding of the relations between civil society and the market has to differentiate between these two kinds of links and has to enquire when and how exactly they converge and differ, instead of trying to establish whether the two sectors are completely disparate or similar. Seeing markets as sets of distinct practices also makes it possible to distinguish between the degrees of corporatism in civil society organisations. Some civic organisations relied more on market based strategies and resembled firms more closely in their way of operation than others. Well-funded organisations had a comparatively high capacity to market themselves; Some had full time marketing officers and fundraisers, organised national competitions to design their logo and had their own publications to spread information about the organisation. Not all these tools were available to organisations with smaller budgets that spend large parts of their revenues on project staff salaries and were little known beyond their immediate location.<sup>240</sup> With respect to practices, it might therefore be more helpful to see the transition between the corporate and non-corporate realm as a continuum of decreasing corporation from private firms, to large and finally to small civic organisations.<sup>241</sup>

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240 See the distinction between ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ organisations in chapter 1.

241 However, this does not mean that large civic organisations were like firms in all respects. As the last section of the chapter will argue, civic organisations, both large and small, differed from private corporations in the distinct structure of their target group.

### *Where markets and civil society are similar: non-governmental corporations*

Scholars have demonstrated that ‘non-profits’ and ‘for profits’ employ similar strategies to achieve their objectives.<sup>242</sup> As John Campell (2005:41) argues both kinds of organisations are forms of coordinated collective action and can thus be analysed in similar ways. He demonstrates how the sociology of corporations and new social movements theory share basic concepts and can benefit from each other’s analysis. The sociology of organisations used insights from New Social Movement theory to understand how firms adapt the way they present their product in response to changing public demands, and has adopted insights from new social movement theory into the importance of networks, in order to understand how ideas travel within the private sector (DiMaggio/Powell 1983; Fligstein 1997). New social movement theory on the other hand has used insights from organisational sociology about the importance of leadership and the role of entrepreneurs to understand how social movements are managed and how decisions are made within ‘non-profits’ (Morris et al 2007). The fruitful cooperation between the two trends in the literature indicates that there are structural similarities between ‘for profit’ and ‘non-profit’ organisations. This section outlines how civic organisations resemble private sector firms by looking at branding and the commodification of activism. It illustrates these points through a case study of one NGO that deliberately employed the structure and strategies of private corporations.

These structural similarities were especially visible in the common coping strategies amongst Namibia’s larger NGOs that could commission their own marketing strategy. They invested considerable resources in research on donor preferences, on branding their own organisation and marketing its “products”. NGOs were keen to gather information about civic activism and donor demands and adjust their services to these new insights. The managerial literature has shown that CEOs carefully read demands from the firm’s environment and adjust organisational structures to accommodate these (Fligstein/Dauter 2007:110). NGO leaders do the

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242 The distinction between ‘for- profit’ and ‘not-for profit’ organisations is a particularly American term. It is quite revealing that the only marked distinction between the two kinds of organisations is what happens to the money, i.e. whether returns go to philanthropy or to shareholders. I decided to keep the NGO label for coherence and because the last section shows that the two sectors differ in more aspects than “just” the destination of the money.

same. Most large NGOs maintained a database of their beneficiaries and some had an archive of their past donors. Sectoral umbrellas kept databases of their member organisations with specific information about their size and activity.<sup>243</sup> The databases' main purpose was to ensure that the umbrella could keep in touch with its members, but databases also enabled umbrellas to portray themselves as knowledgeable representatives of their member organisations.<sup>244</sup> NANGOF recently commissioned a "Civil society baseline survey" that collected data from organisations in all 13 regions of the country, in order to arrive at a clearer picture of civic activism. The consultant told me that the umbrella was particularly keen on responses to the questions about NANGOF. The final survey report consequently included concrete recommendations for NANGOF to raise its level of awareness amongst civil society organisations (NANGOF June 2009: 57). NANASO published a biannual directory of AIDS service organisations based on regularly updated surveys and commissioned a study of members' training needs some time ago.<sup>245</sup>

NGO directors often attributed a particular organisation's success or decline to its leader's ability to recognise new trends in donor requirements. Environmental uncertainties not only affected organisations' performances but also inter-organisational relations (Blau/Rabrenovic 1991). Organisations teamed up to ensure they covered a broader range of issues between them and to reduce overlaps.<sup>246</sup> However, uncertainty could also increase tensions in those relations and bring out competition more clearly as the previous chapter on funding argued.

One of the less acknowledged ways of coping with uncertainty was to bluff expertise, and to simply make up the relevant skills if required. Civic organisations would occasionally pretend to have the relevant expertise or promise services without the capacity to deliver them. These strategies all included a more or less calculable

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<sup>243</sup> See chapter 3

<sup>244</sup> As the chapter on documents already indicated, umbrellas often used the number of entries in their database to prove that they were in close touch with members and had a good overview over activities in the sector.

<sup>245</sup> NANASO's training is open to all civil society organisations. However the workshop fees are waived for members, a mechanism NANASO often uses to persuade civic organisations to join the umbrella. The umbrella is particularly keen to recruit new members as the membership rate is an important factor to support NANASO's claim to represent all AIDS service organisations in the country.

<sup>246</sup> Several organisations working on similar topics have entered memoranda of understanding and NANGOF attempts to reduce overlaps through regular meetings in Sector Working Groups and between sectoral umbrellas. For a critical analysis of the "coordination" in those meetings see chapter 4.



risk, and organisations would only employ them exceptionally, e.g. when the donor was too remote to regularly check on the project's progress, or when changes were slim that the deception would have any serious repercussions. Organisations promised more than they could deliver in order to keep a loose contact with donors that could be revived anytime. Shortly after bird flu had broken out in Europe, a FAO delegation visited NANGOF to assess whether civil society was prepared for an eventual outbreak of the pandemic in Namibia. Not only was NANGOF not prepared for the meeting, the umbrella also had had no contact with any organisation that it could refer the delegation to. However, NANGOF's director successfully talked her organisation out of the delicate situation with a few general statements about civil society's expertise being located in member organisations, and advised the FAO visitors to consult a number of agricultural organisations directly (Research Notes 11/06/2008). In another instance, the Namibia Development Trust engaged on behalf of NANGOF in the transnational "Global Call to Action against Poverty" (GCAP) alliance.<sup>247</sup> NDT convinced GCAP that it had the necessary contacts to set up a national awareness-raising campaign. However, the NDT only had a strong network in the south and northeast of the country and far too few staff to set up a national network in order to implement the campaign. All the NDT did for GCAP was to design a poster advert in Windhoek's city centre which allegedly stood in no relation to the amount of money the organisation had received.

In most cases however, civil society organisations avoided having to lie about their capacities and invested a lot to find out about donor preferences during the project planning stages, in order to achieve a better fit between their projects and demands, and to promote their services more efficiently.<sup>248</sup> The literature disagrees whether this increased market awareness of NGOs is a good development. Some scholars see the marketization of NGOs as dangerous trend that will necessarily compromise the organisations' contributions to grassroots democracy and their focus on "beneficiaries" (Eikenberry/Kluver 2004). This literature seems to assume that

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247 The GCAP is a loose alliance of non-governmental organisations, community groups, trade unions, individuals and faith groups around the world who have agreed to lobby their national governments to act more decisively on poverty eradication. The headquarters in the Netherlands coordinates campaigns and administers the coalition's funding.

248 See also the previous chapter that argued that NGO staff often invested considerable time to find out about donors' preferences despite their claims not to adhere to particular "aid fashions".

there is an inevitable contradiction between NGOs' core objectives and market demands. Another trend sees increased market awareness and branding of non-governmental organisations as absolutely essential for organisations' sustainability and independence. These accounts see branding as the necessary adjustment organisations have to make in order to adjust to the changing politics of giving. They argue that a highly visible public image is the only means to overcome funding fatigue, access new resources and thus ensure the organisation's sustainability (Wootliff/Deri 2001; Vestergaard 2008; Wells 2001).

This argument was obviously shared by Namibian civil society actors who worried about the decline in international funding and started to actively search for alternative income sources in order to ensure organisational survival. During a focus group discussion at the LAC staff discussed how to increase the public profile of their work to attract local donors instead of continue to rely exclusively on international aid (Research Notes 26/10/2006). NANGOF's chairperson said that NGOs needed business minds to find sustainable alternatives to decreasing international funding (Research Notes 22/07/2008) and another NGO leader stated that organisations needed to partner up with the private sector if they wanted to survive the ongoing funding decline.<sup>249</sup> Civic organisations planned to increase their market profile, to improve their public relations and to open new markets and thus phrased their plans for the future in a particularly business-like idiom.

## **The commodification of civic activism**

As John Keane (2003) argued civil society has always been part of the market, and civil society organisations arguably always needed to pay particular attention to donor requirements. Civil society practices of fundraising and advertising have always resembled those used by private corporations and it would be wrong to regard these practices as originating in the private sector from where they were adapted by civic organisations. Instead those practices are common to organisations seeking to attract money from outside, irrespective of whether the funds are for profit or not. The

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249 Interview Coordinator, National Association of CBNRM Organisations, Windhoek 24/06/2008.

common practices make civil society and the private sector comparable, and civil society's marketing strategies did not necessarily represent a new trend towards a commodified activism.

However, what had changed was that NGO leaders saw the creation of a unique public profile as the only way to find new funding and increasingly used a business idiom to talk about their work and civil society's internal relations. They redefined accountability as accounting, transparency as controlling, and relevance as high public profile. They thought an accountable umbrella ought to ensure that members received high rates of return on their invested trust and resources. Several participants at SWG meetings stated that civil society organisations needed to own NANGOF if the umbrella was to establish any meaningful relation with its members. They thought that the best way to ensure this was for organisations to pay membership fees, because then they would hold NANGOF accountable (Research Notes 02/07/2008). One director said that organisations employed a cost-benefit analysis in calculating whether they should join NANGOF and it was the umbrella's responsibility to ensure that the calculus was in its favour. According to him one of the umbrella's functions should be to advance members' transparency by helping them to have sound budgets. The most important task of NANGOF was to "do the branding" (Research Notes 22/07/2008) of civil society – to sell civic activism to the outside world and ensure that it remained relevant. Donors, governments and the general public were all seen as potential customers to 'buy' civic activism. Several directors suggested that the Namibian government should pay civic organisations as service providers instead of supporting them out of charity. Seeing donors and government more as customers than as philanthropic supporters meant that NGO leaders had to increase the market value of their organisation.<sup>250</sup> Evaluations of civic activism had thus turned into judgements about the value donors got for their money.<sup>251</sup>

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250 This image matched donors' own preferences to support strong and more corporate NGOs who could convincingly show that they reached comparatively many people and could produce quantifiable outcomes.

251 Tellingly very little was said about alternative accountabilities, transparency and relevance e.g. how closely the projects matched recipients' demands and how well organisation kept them informed about their work.

The new NANGOF has taken seriously the idea that civic activism and inter-organisational relations were products to be owned, traded, and branded like any other commodity. It has sorted its accounts, commissioned several market research surveys and has organised a promotional tour of its civil society management qualification. It has invoiced its members to ensure they contribute and “own” the umbrella and regularly encourages members to communicate any specific requests for assistance to the umbrella. However, after members followed this invitation and started to express demands, NANGOF’s executive director encouraged the staff to see the umbrella as a firm delivering particular pre-defined services and not as demand driven organisation.<sup>252</sup> She organised a couple of strategic meetings for the NANGOF secretariat in the first two months in order to help employees understand what these services actually were. The first of these was an entire day of “strategic planning”, designed to encourage staff to internalise their organisation’s objectives and feel responsible that they were realised in time. A human resources consultant organised the planning meeting with a number of small exercises used in the private sector to encourage people to be self governing employees, exercises in efficient time management and target group awareness. The overall purpose of the meeting was to become clearer about the “product we want to deliver” (Research Notes 30/05/2008). The second of these meetings was much shorter and took place a month later. This “benefits” meeting was designed as unstructured session asking staff what services NANGOF could provide to its members. The director had called for this meeting to bring out a clear profile, because she only wanted to promise particular services when she was certain that the secretariat could deliver them. She pointed out that she wanted to engage in something successful, because she had a career ahead of her and did not think that any company would hire her in the future if she did not see to it that NANGOF kept its promise (Research Notes 30/06/2008). In the staff exercise the director made the close connection between internal and external branding. Internal branding aims to instil a strong sense of corporate identity in employees, so that staff feel personally responsible for organisational performance and reputation. The literature on NGO branding shares the assumption that “internal branding” is an

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252 Those demands included all kinds of services from secretarial duties to help with finding donors, coordination of civil society wide concerns and to make its office space and equipment available to member organisations. Some of these demands clearly overstepped the limit of what the secretariat was prepared to provide; for example NANGOF staff regularly refused one Board member’s request to “book” NANGOF’s meeting room for his own organisation .

important factor in brand equity and the overall success of an organisation. As Nathalie Laidler-Kylander and Bernard Simonin (2009:64) argued “efforts to increase operational focus have a direct impact [...] on [...] organizational legitimacy and brand positioning, which helps differentiate an organization from its competitors.”

NANGOF's director repeated a common argument in the literature when she assumed that the same branding strategies worked in the private sector and in civil society because the two kinds of organisations functioned in essentially the same way. She claimed that NGO directors were like CEOs with the additional task of finding the money they ought to spend (Research Notes 30/06/2008) and another director argued that a good NGO leader was above all a successful manager.<sup>253</sup> NANGOF's director tried to create a corporate image of NANGOF inspired by civil society organisations with a strong marketing strategy that seemed to flourish even in times of declining funds. These organisations seemed to confirm the assumption that successful branding was indeed the only solution to the funding crisis. One of the organisations with such a strong marketing strategy was Women's Action for Development (WAD). WAD has not only grown in times of declining civil society funding, it is also one of the few remaining NGOs to receive core funding and has done so for the past 14 years.

#### *Women's Action for Development Inc*

When I first met the director of Women's Action for Development she handed me a business card with the WAD logo and the subtitle “corporation not for gain”. And indeed the organisation resembled a corporation in all but tradable shares.<sup>254</sup> WAD's strategy and structure were closely modelled on that of a commercial firm, including central planning and quantifiable indicators to define success. The organisation presented its objectives in the form of a business plan, complete with measurable indicators that assume that all objectives were calculable and could be broken down into a number of discrete centrally planned activities. WAD's first objective was to contribute to poverty alleviation, by training people in income

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253 Interview Country Director Project Hope, Windhoek 12/06/2008.

254 It is a section 21 company which in Namibian legal terms means a company without share capital.

generating skills<sup>255</sup>. This training was designed centrally and delivered at WAD's regional centres. WAD claimed that its success was largely based on "strong directives which are continuously given through to staff and project members by the WAD Management".<sup>256</sup> This meant that all projects were developed in Windhoek and passed on as directives to regional centres. The centralised management structure did not leave any room for inputs from trainees or adaptations to particular contexts.<sup>257</sup>

WAD assumed that market mechanisms like competition, self-promotion and public presentations would not only lead to material independence but render psychological benefits as well. The organisation believed that trainees would feel more self confident, proud and assertive by taking part in a public competition with highly visible awards. Trade fairs, auctions and public presentations were all presented as essential in people's self realisation by helping them to overcome inhibiting self consciousness. WAD claims that through their ceremonies and events, trainees had grown the confidence to speak in public which "merely proves the point that some of the greatest barriers to our performance are often situated within ourselves."<sup>258</sup> The organisation therefore argued that the best way to promote rural women was to increase their "market value". The organisation's projects were based on the neo-liberal assumption that an active engagement in the economy will not only achieve material independence but also psychological well being.

Analysing WAD's activities in a market idiom shows how complex the structure of NGOs' 'customers' and 'products' is. At first sight, WAD's 'customers' were the rural women who signed up for the courses, and the organisation's official 'product' was the training it provided. However, the organisation's customers were also donors and politicians who invested money, time and support in WAD and its services. The NGO was therefore the producer and the produce at the same time. This double function was especially visible during WAD's "field days". Field days were organised for trainees to showcase their products and generate income, but they also

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255 The number of people trained could thus be presented as indicator that measured how far the organisation had progressed towards poverty alleviation. Using the number of people as evidence of success is arguably a particularly private sector practice as corporations measure their success through quantifiable indicators alone.

256 <http://www.wad.org.na/> last accessed 05/05/2010.

257 This structure directly contradicts Nathalie Laidler-Kylander's and Bernard Simonin's (2009) argument that NGOs are decentralised with flat hierarchies which make them difficult organisations to manage.

258 <http://www.wad.org.na/> last accessed 05/05/2010

provided an opportunity for the organisation's supporters to be seen, entertained and feel good about themselves. WAD proudly pointed to the high community turnout at field days. However, it is very likely that the high turnout had more to do with the general attraction of public events in rural areas than with the attendees' genuine sense of belonging to WAD. Field days were highly popular because they were particularly entertaining. WAD was keen to display the "diversity of Namibian culture" and stated that "since the regions in which WAD operates often coincide with different cultures, the annual conferences continuously reflect the diversity of the cultural landscape in Namibia. WAD conferences therefore invariably represent a kaleidoscope of colours, traditional attires etc, but similarly of inspirational and motivational views and opinions."<sup>259</sup>

In this regard WAD's trainees were not (only) customers but part of the WAD brand, the "cultural asset" the organisation brought into play to promote its work and to show its competitive advantage to potential sponsors. WAD was keen to display cultural activities and artefacts during its field days, and requested regular supply of photos from the training sessions to publish in its reports. The organisation also encouraged members to wear WAD membership cards - officially to instil a sense of belonging in trainees - but the public display of the WAD logo above all raised the level of the NGO's public awareness. WAD's executive director had pursued a very forceful media campaign to market the organisation as a particular attractive partner with a proven connection to grassroots.<sup>260</sup> WAD's high public visibility was the main reason why the organisation's primary sponsor has supported the NGO for the past 15 years.<sup>261</sup> WAD's capacity to exploit the attraction of cultural artefacts for its branding (Comaroff/Commaroff 2009) provided the organisation with a highly efficient cultural capital in Bourdieu's sense.<sup>262</sup> However, the organisation could only use the cultural artefacts this efficiently because it was in a position to set the context in which they were displayed and seen. WAD's cultural capital was thus based on highly

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<sup>259</sup> <http://www.wad.org.na/> last accessed 05/05/2010

<sup>260</sup> Some people in civil society remarked that the director had not really changed careers when she gave up her job as TV presenter to set up a women's organisation (Research Notes 31/03/2008).

<sup>261</sup> Interview Country Director Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Windhoek 09/11/2006.

<sup>262</sup> For Bourdieu capital is an agent's ability to use the available resources efficiently (2000). The better an agent can put resources to use the larger is his/her capital. This definition differs considerably from the purely economic understanding of cultural capital as the discrete (monetary) value added through 'culture' (Throsby 1999).

unequal relations between the empowering agency and those to be empowered (Cruikshank 1999: 72). WAD could dictate the terms of empowerment, and designed its workshops in a way that stressed the ethnic undertones that made the organisation so appealing for international supporters.

Martin Chanock (2002:26) and the Comaroffs (2009) argued that cultural artefacts are particularly apt for branding, because brands aim to create an emotional link between the consumer and the product. Brand promotion ties customers' feelings in particular situations to a distinct brand name. Customers' attachment is thus not created through the experience of using a product but by evoking particular contextual memories. Brand managers thus link products to characteristically non-monetary life experience (Arvidsson 2006: 13). WAD's field days were so successful in branding the NGO because they created a particular life experience for supporters and tied this closely to the organisation's name. The NGO assembled an entire cultural-rural-women imaginary around its services which promised its "customers" that "after purchase they will reflect in their new self representation" (Mattelart 1991: 195). Field days essentialised the meaning of 'rural women' in order to speak directly to WAD's main sponsor's self image as supporting disadvantaged groups and as promoting a social market economy (Chanock 2002:26).

WAD's cultural branding showed that an NGOs' beneficiaries were customers and product at the same time. Rural women paid fees for their training but they were also presented as carriers of the cultural diversity that distinguished WAD services from those of other NGOs. The organisation itself was the producer of services and the product to be sold to the media, to donors and politicians. Those roles were not mutually exclusive. It was not the case that WAD was either promoting the cause of rural women or trying to sell itself, it could pursue both objectives and the mixture of motives is most common amongst (non-profit) organisations (Aldrige 2005:147). Activists often claimed to contribute to social development by promoting "their" organisation, because only strong NGOs could successfully promote the cause of their beneficiaries (Research Notes 23/01/2008).

However, organisations rarely investigated whether there was indeed a close link between their objectives and their recipients' needs. They assumed that an



NGOs' successful marketing strategy would be equally appealing to donors and beneficiaries. NGOs usually promote two kinds of products to two distinct customer groups and this makes it doubtful whether the straightforward adaptation of marketing strategies always works for civil society. When NANGOF was reconstituted, hopes were high that the new start would enable the umbrella to finally redress its long term lack of support amongst members. The assumption was that NANGOF would resolve its legitimacy deficit simply by marketing itself more effectively. Since its reconstitution, NANGOF has invested considerable resources into raising the level of its awareness. One of the first tasks of the new Secretariat was to establish contact with civil society organisations nearby, and invite all interested organisations to a presentation about the new Trust (Research Notes 06/05/2008). According to NANGOF's director and Board members, the most important task of incoming staff was to promote the umbrella. The Board's chairman said that the umbrella needed to advertise its services better, and several NGO representatives urged the umbrella to make it clear to civil society organisations what they could gain by joining NANGOF (Research Notes 22/07/2008). They seemed to believe that NANGOF had a low reputation in civil society because its service had not been sufficiently advertised, and the umbrella had failed to create a distinct identity amongst its potential members. NANGOF has thus started to distribute an email newsletter every fortnight and has published a quarterly magazine from August 2009 onwards. The new Trust has recently been launched in a high level public ceremony. All these initiatives served to increase the umbrella's level of public awareness and frequent comments on NANGOF's email service suggested that the umbrella was very successful in doing that. However, NANGOF had not really suffered from low levels of awareness. A previous funding application stated that one of its greatest strengths was that NANGOF is established as a household name in Namibia, recognised even beyond civil society (NANGOF 27 June 2004). And indeed a recent survey of civil society organisations showed that a majority of organisations were aware that the umbrella existed. However, they were still reluctant to become members although most acknowledged that it was generally good to have an umbrella.

## *How civil society differs from the market*

### **The two publics**

NANGOF's increased efforts to market itself did not lead to more trust in the umbrella because the service it offered had arguably very little to do with the concerns of civil society organisations. In its marketing campaign, NANGOF presented itself as enhancing democracy and transparency by promoting civil society organisations and by making internal decision making processes clearer to members. This rhetoric stood in sharp contrast to what member organisations had seen from the umbrella so far. Wide consultations, presented as the main tools to democratise civil society, had not taken place. NANGOF consulted only a small number of organisations to establish a "civil society" wide position to the government's partnership policy,<sup>263</sup> to draw up the people's budget or to elicit a 'sector wide' position on poverty alleviation. The organisations that provided input at NANGOF's consultations were usually well connected, with a high public profile and already established close links to NANGOF through its Board, through sharing a building or through personal connections. None of the "national consultations" so far included organisations based outside of Windhoek and none of the civil society wide events attracted representatives of new regionally based NGOs.<sup>264</sup> Rural organisations were only contacted if the umbrella wanted to promote an already defined service like its civil society management qualification or the sector's response to the government's partnership policy. The umbrella has only recently started to gather information from non - Windhoek based civic organisations. The first "Civil society organisations baseline survey" points to a huge gap between the services NANGOF offers and what civic organisations consider to be relevant. The survey makes it clear that regionally based NGOs do not think that they needed support e.g. in becoming more transparent or efficient, because they considered themselves as already transparent and efficient enough.<sup>265</sup>

NANGOF's legitimacy crisis points to more than a mere omission on the part of the umbrella. It is indicative of civil society's fundamental problem of the "two

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263 See chapter 5

264 As the chapter on civil society's relations to the government already argued, long distances and insufficient support network in rural areas made it particularly difficult for NANGOF to organise a truly national consultation.

265 Rural organisations awarded themselves 4 out of 5 possible points for organisational structure, target group focus and Board performance and thus ranked themselves considerably higher in all aspects than their Windhoek- based peers (NANGOF June 2009).

publics”. What NANGOF and WAD had in common and what distinguished them and most civil society organisations from private firms was that their target groups did not constitute their revenue basis. Private corporations’ target group and their money source were identical. Civil society organisations received their funds from donors, but their (stated) target group were the beneficiaries of their projects. The remainder of the chapter examines what consequences this division has for NGO practices. It does not seek to repeat the traditional argument that donors simply dictate the terms of civic engagement, but argues that the separation between recipients and revenue basis deeply affects NGOs’ projects. This section uses insights from New Institutional Economics theory, especially the idea that economic activity is embedded in actors’ multiple networks of strong and weak ties (Amin 2003; Granovetter 1985). These different ties provide actors and organisations with certain opportunities while precluding others. This section shows that NGOs’ strong ties to donors meant that organisations constructed donor demands as dynamic and in need of constant attention. Their weak ties to beneficiaries, in contrast, meant that NGOs thought of their needs as unchanging, and often their wishes remained unarticulated. Since they did not investigate beneficiaries’ demands, organisations could blend them with their own goals.

The division of NGOs’ social networks structured NGOs’ entire economic activity as New Institutional Economics theory has argued.<sup>266</sup> Mark Granovetter (1985) has demonstrated that economic actions are inseparably linked to actors’ social networks. The combination of strong and weak ties has a significant impact on the shape of economic activity, on what counts as ‘rational behaviour’ in transactions<sup>267</sup> and on mechanisms to establish trust as important asset in economic relations. Mark Granovetter (1985) argued that trust is created through repeated interaction between known partners; the repetition reassures partners that they will not be deceived by their counterpart. Strong civil society organisations interact much more regularly with

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266 New Social Movement Theory has used the concept of embeddedness of the market to demonstrate how social movements’ inclusion in strong and weak ties shapes their activities (Campbell 2005).

267 The specific composition of networks together with culture and experience create particular understanding of how the world works, i.e. particular forms of rationality (North 1995:18).

their urban peers and donors than with their projects' recipients.<sup>268</sup> NANGOF did not contact rural civic organisations until well into its first year of funding, but has maintained a daily contact with its main donor in the years leading up to the funding agreement. The small grants funds administrator at the Finnish embassy told me that she maintained frequent contact with most civic organisations and knew people there quite well.<sup>269</sup> Donor agencies with a local representative held regular funding meetings with their main recipient NGOs to check on project progress and discuss new ideas. Regular interactions between NGOs and their donors meant that donors could have confidence in the quality of the service their partner NGOs provided and assured NGOs that new project ideas would receive a sympathetic hearing with established supporters. In a relationship of trust both partners are assured that the cooperation will only come loose in really exceptional circumstances (Granovetter 1985: 496). When the Austrian national development agency terminated its support to the Legal Assistance Centre's gender unit the project staff interpreted this as a distinct breach of trust between the unit and its donor (Research Notes 09/11/ 2006).

The close links between NGOs and donors meant that mutual trust was based on a high number of interactions and experiences. It also let civic organisations see donor demands much more in focus than beneficiaries' requests. NGOs' perceptions were based on a circular argument: because they paid much closer attention to donor demands these appeared as constantly changing and thus requiring further attention. Beneficiaries' demands in contrast were never investigated and could therefore be constructed as unchanging and not worthy objects for investigation.

### **Civil society's promotional culture**

When NANGOF designed its major funding application it did not ask members what they thought an umbrella should be doing. It had spent two years negotiating the project with its main donor, but only contacted new and old members when the project objectives had already been set. When I suggested a small survey amongst prospective members what they thought NANGOF should be doing, the interim director dismissed this saying that members will expect NANGOF provide all

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268 It is quite interesting to think about the flip-side of this argument: rural civic organisations lack this close interaction with donors. They can thus not build up the relationships of trust which are essential preconditions for economic partnerships according to Granovetter.

269 Interview Program Officer Embassy of Finland, Windhoek 21/11/2006.

the suggested services and more, which was not durable under the already agreed project objectives. NANGOF's executive director stated that the umbrella should not be demand driven. The secretariat needed to decide what it could offer and announce that, rather than trying to meet the different demands of NANGOF members. The caution not to be demand driven was based on the assumption that beneficiaries' demands would always be exaggerated and unrealizable whereas donor requirements might be unpredictable but at least durable and time-bound. One NGO director said that rural communities were, and always would be, hungry. It was dominant donor demands that changed and thus dictated the organisation's changing project designs.<sup>270</sup>

However, beneficiaries did have concrete and changing demands. NANGOF's members had very specific demands on the umbrella that could not be constructed as general and unobtainable needs. They demanded concrete help with finding donors and designing project applications; they sought information about other civil society organisations from the umbrella and repeatedly asked the umbrella to negotiate benefit schemes on the sector's behalf. NANGOF responded to these demands only selectively. The request to arrange for a sector wide medical aid scheme has been acknowledged time and again but so far NANGOF has not contacted relevant donors or negotiated with health insurers.<sup>271</sup> The umbrella did address the need for better information about funding, and commissioned a funding directory which had been one of the repeated explicit demands from members. However the directory was not part of umbrella's core activity and could only be published because NANGOF used an intern to do the research and draft the directory. Subsequently NANGOF pointed to the funding directory to show that the umbrella was indeed responsive to members' demands, a key asset for any organisation claiming to represent civil society. NANGOF needed to combine its response to donor demands with concrete proofs that its members actively invested in the umbrella, because this support made the organisation particularly legitimate in the eyes of its funders. Beneficiaries had thus become part of the organisations' corporate assets in a promotional culture that blurred the distinction between content and advertisement. As Alan Alderidge

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270 Interview Country Director Project Hope, Windhoek 12/06/2008.

271 Protocols of Sectoral Working Group Meetings and Directors' Forum from 2006 already mention a civil society wide medical aid scheme as central demand from members (NANGOF 2006; NANGOF 14 Februar 2006).

(2005:152-154) shows for British universities, promotional culture redefines target groups as the institutions' competitive assets. Universities have started to see students as resources in their competition for state funding. Alderidge argues that universities have increasingly blurred the boundaries between advertisers and their products, encouraging the state to invest in a particular university instead of promoting the specific education it delivers. Similarly NGOs have encouraged donors to fund organisations instead of the particular services they render. Funding applications flag the specific advantages of the organisation instead of promoting a particular service. The Legal Assistance Centre argues for the need to have a public interest law firm instead of advocating for example gender sensitive legislation, special legal protection of HIV positive people or legal services for conservancies. The Namibian Nature Foundation stresses that it has the highest concentration of environmental expertise in country, instead of arguing why this expertise important.<sup>272</sup>

Since members had become part of the NGOs' corporate asset, they had to fit into the overall image the organisations created for themselves, and had to fulfil the specific roles the organisations had assigned them. NANGOF and other umbrellas presented themselves to donors as facilitating training, enhancing communication and ensuring standards. Members were therefore represented as remote, isolated and in need of training together with an acute awareness of their deficits and a genuine interest to improve. The NANGOF-EC finance agreement states that "a legitimate Namibian civil society is rather new and coordination among civil society organisations is under-developed" (European Commission 2002:3) and that "both CBOs and NGOs are in high need of capacity building interventions [by the umbrella and its donor, SH] that address both the knowledge and the financial aspects of capacity" (ibid: 4). Tellingly NANGOF also claimed that it needed full-time staff to "spread out the principles of accountability, transparency and representativeness" (ibid: 6). It thus suggests that it took a fully staffed secretariat to persuade members of their real needs.

NANGOF also suggested that all civic organisations needed specific institutional components: mission statements, regular evaluations, a clear governance

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272 Alan Alderidge (2005) concludes that promotion culture makes it doubtful whether markets indeed treat customers as sovereign. The experiences of civic organisations indicate that from the two publics only donors were treated as sovereign and targeted in advertising.

structure all of which should be made public in the name of transparency and accountability. When civic organisations applied for NANGOF membership they had to agree that the umbrella could check their policies regularly in order to ensure that members complied with the (compulsory) Code of Conduct. NANGOF was no exception; most sectoral umbrellas had their own code of ethics in which members pledged to let the umbrella evaluate their spending patterns, their human resources policies and their project cycle management. NANGOF's attempt to establish a civil society wide self regulation was another example of how the umbrella asserted a central role in the constructed need for more transparency.<sup>273</sup>

### *Conclusion: An incorporated civil society?*

How important are the similarities and differences; can civil society organisations be described as charitable firms and does civil society essentially function like the private sector? The answer might as well be that civic organisations function like private firms but that they do so with respect to a different market. New Institutional Economics theory argued that markets are embedded practices that are structured by actors' positions in multiple networks (Granovetter 1985; Hollingsworth/Boyer 1997). The particular composition of these networks is therefore the single most important factor in determining the nature of the market. Network ties are the kind of enduring collective forces that shape the economy (Amin 2003:51). They determine actors' choices and what counts as rational in this context. Civil society's rationality is markedly different from private sector's rationality, because NGOs operate in a context of a divided demand structure. Civic organisations thus pursue similar objectives to private firms, i.e. they seek to further organisational growth and to promote their own work, but their embeddedness in different networks has important consequences for the way they represent their work, how they relate to donors and recipients and ultimately for their self image as non governmental corporations.

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<sup>273</sup> See the discussion of NANGOF's Code of Conduct in chapter 5.

This chapter has proposed to rethink the relation between civil society and the market. It has shown that civil society is not merely a sphere of ideas contrasting with the market as realm of relations of production and exchange. The chapter's case studies of WAD and NANGOF demonstrated that civic organisations do "produce" something; they attempt to tailor their "products" to dominant demands and try hard to market them. NGOs' dependence on donors meant that civic organisations sought to tailor their services more to donor than to recipients' demands. They increasingly represented their work in a business language because they felt that this would attract more funding from donors who sought to increase the rates of return on their grants. The recent idea that civil society's actions had to be represented in the idiom of the market represented a distinct trend towards the commodification of activism. The increased commodification of activism was therefore not the result of different practices, but was brought about by changes in the way activists represented these practices. It shows that organisations only regarded donors as rational choice-making independent customers worth targeting. They called for 'business minds' to attract more funding rather than as a way to mediate between donors and recipients and thus to further their accountability vis-à-vis local communities. Activists did not see recipients as demand making customers, but as the NGOs' organisational asset who they could use to sell their services better to donors.

This chapter's case study of the waning support for NANGOF has shown the limits of this view. NANGOF encountered a crisis of legitimacy because it presented its membership support as the umbrella's greatest asset, a support that was not forthcoming, because NANGOF had never investigated members' expectations. NANGOF's case makes it highly doubtful whether civic organisations' self image is correct, and that the organisations are indeed closely linked with their target groups and advocates of recipients' demands. It also casts doubt on NGOs' claim to deliver the most needed services efficiently, because it challenges the underlying assumption that NGOs know what these services were.

NGOs nevertheless maintained their image as true advocates of communities' needs, because it enabled them to construct a self image as altruistic organisations whose work stood in stark contrast to market principles and the selfish pursuit of money by private businesses. However as Jonathan Parry (1986) has argued, goods



and services given without an immediate return are not necessarily free from an utilitarian calculus and thus contrary to market exchanges. NGOs did benefit from communities, because they could use them as valuable corporate assets and because the dominant image of communities-as-beneficiaries created a clear hierarchy between the two sides, an unequal exchange in which the organisations could present themselves as the sovereign agent to determine the projects' design.

In contrast, relations to donors as customers assumed equality between the two sides. NGOs expected to be paid for their due services and saw themselves as donors' equal partners. Grants were thus based on relations of trust between known partners. The anthropological literature distinguishes between barter and monetary exchange (Humphrey/Hugh Jones 1992: 1-2) Barter as exchange of items that are different in kind takes place between free and equal partners and is based on their mutual trust. Barter is contextual, because the value of the exchanged items depends on the social relations between exchangers. Monetary exchange in contrast replaces the need for context with a universally accepted medium and therefore does not presuppose any particular relations between exchangers. However, NGOs' close networks with donors show that trust and long personal relations were decisive in their relations to funders, a relation that heavily influenced the value of NGOs' exchange assets, their services.

## Conclusion

The thesis started by asking how we best understand civil society. The previous chapters have explored the relationship between the umbrella for Namibian NGOs and its members and investigated why NGOs do the things they do. They have shown that NGOs systematically prioritised administrative issues at the expense of substantial discussions about the purpose and relevance of civil society. This prioritisation had a direct impact on NGOs' definition of accountability, transparency and relevance, it structured their relations to external actors, created hierarchies between NGOs and gave rise to a fundamental tension between organisations' ideal self image as committed activists and the bureaucratic reality of their work.

NGOs' systematic bias towards the administrative suggests that the disappearance of recipients' agency from civil society projects was much more than mere oversight on the part of the organisations. NGOs' procedural understanding of accountability, their tight integration into administrative networks to donors and their focus on the correct form created a self contained system that structurally passed over recipients' demands. NGOs focused on administrative issues because the clear standards of protocol offered them concrete evidence of organisational action and tangible standards that were much preferable to their projects' elusive impact on recipients. NGOs thus used technicalities to assess their work, to plan future projects and to evaluate accountability and good organisational practice.

### *Administering civil society, creating accountability.*

Organisations spent most of their resources on executing administrative tasks like writing reports, maintaining databases, preparing audits, administering meetings and compiling funding proposals. It was these mundane tasks, rather than any grand visions about civil society's purpose that defined NGOs' accountability and work priorities. These tasks were partly required by donors, but NGOs themselves presented them as 'best practice' within the sector and often used them to distinguish civil society from the central government and the private sector.

Michael Edwards and David Hulme (1997) have argued that NGOs in Africa are too dependent on donors to be able to autonomously define their work agenda. According to them the increase in international funding brought about a particularly procedural definition of accountability. Donors piled additional layers of bureaucracy on top of NGOs' grassroots projects which distorted the organisations' original calling and the pro-poor agenda of their projects, dissolved their bonds to their original constituencies, and turned them into urban middle class professional associations.

However, the thesis has demonstrated that NGOs' procedural understanding of accountability and transparency was as much internally generated as externally demanded. Rather than being completely determined by donors, NGOs themselves sought to demonstrate organisational integrity and accountability through regular work reports, through audits and through a formally correct "consultations". The success of any project was redefined as close fit between its proposal and outcome and unrelated to its impact in society. Transparency was redefined as proper auditing instead of open relations to the recipients. Efficiency was not measured in maximal benefit for communities but defined as effective management visible in the timely conclusion of projects, in the frequency of stakeholder meetings or the number of people trained in NGO workshops.

This particular view turned recipients into organisational assets, with the number of project recipients as proof of organisational efficiency. NGOs thus treated recipients as resource to demonstrate a high rate of return for donor money. NGO work therefore created a bifurcated network which assumed equality between administrative partners and created a hierarchy between organisations and recipients. This division turned out to be particularly problematic if recipients' demands did not overlap with the project's objectives. The thesis has shown that NGO projects could be particularly out of touch with recipients' expectations, a gap that resulted in stalled projects and 'crises of accountability', defined as the lack of fit between project proposal and outcome.

The closer embeddedness of NGOs in administrative networks had a direct impact on the ways in which NGO staff conceptualised civil society's role in

development which they redefined as the formally correct procedures. Consequently they thought that the prime function of the national umbrella body for civic organisations was to promote the effective administration of civil society rather than to facilitate any substantial debate about the sector's role. People working in NGOs evaluated their own and their peers' performance through written evidence of civic activism, i.e. by assessing whether reports, meeting protocols or grant applications followed the correct form and resembled similar kinds of documents (Riles 1998; 2000).

### *Inside the NGO box: the self referentiality of bureaucracy*

The thesis has shown how NGO staff themselves systematically prioritised instantaneous administrative tasks and neglected more substantial but less immediate questions about the value and purpose of civic activism. As agents in their own right NGOs evaluated their actions predominantly in relation to administrative standards. Staff assessed organisational performance by technical accuracy rather than substantial impact. NGOs evaluated the usefulness of documents with reference to formal aspects and their fit with preceding documentations (Riles 1998; Reed 2006:171). Civil society wide meetings generated above all more meetings instead of promoting NGOs' networks with recipients or a better coordination of civil society projects. Funding management was above all concerned with an exact correlation between a project's proposal and its final report. Accountability was defined as following the correct procedures to spend the grant in the designated manner and was not defined as the impact the project had on recipients. Civic activism therefore resembled the "network" in Riles definition as "set of institutions, (...) practices and artifacts that internally generate the effects of their own reality by reflecting on themselves" (2000:3).

The disappearance of recipients' agency from civil society's project was therefore neither mere oversight nor an intentional disregard on the part of NGOs. The organisations' procedural understanding of accountability, their close links to donors and their focus on formality created a self referential system that only marginally acknowledged recipients' demands. The internal closure of dominant NGO practices has also been documented in NGO ethnographies beyond Africa. Annelise Riles's

(2000) demonstrated that networking between women's NGOs in Fiji constituted a closed system without any direct relation to the outside. Dorothea Hilhorst (2003:10) argued that dominant discourses about and in Philippine NGOs resulted in a particular understanding of their work and silenced alternative ideas about their role. By contrast the thesis has shown that ideological discourses about NGOs had only marginal impact on NGO practices rather than defining them directly.

### *The practice of doing good: Tension between aspiration and reality*

The primacy of the administrative is certainly not particular to civil society and classical organisational theory argued that an efficient administration and a rational bureaucracy distinguished organisations from other forms of collectives (March/Simon 1993). However, NGOs had long grappled with unrealistic expectations on their work. Lester Salamon for instance called the rise of NGOs an “associational revolution to deliver human services, promote grassroots economic development, prevent environmental degradation, protect civil rights and pursue a thousand other objectives formerly unattended or left to the state” (1994:1). Salamon's representation fits in a long tradition of presenting NGOs as issue driven activists which created tension between what NGOs aspired to be and the reality of their daily work that was mostly concerned with administrative tasks. This tension also had a profound impact on NGOs' relations to donors, private corporations and the state. Civic organisations often collaborated closely with state agencies, but were reluctant to acknowledge this cooperation due to the dominant idea that state - civil society relations were antagonistic. In their relations to the private sector NGOs were often caught between their admiration for an idealised version of “the market” and their caution to distinguish themselves from private corporations who in their opinion lacked NGOs' activist zeal. Lastly in their relations to donors civic organisations often faced the dilemma of showcasing grassroots activism to attract funding and at the same time emphasising bureaucratic diligence to ensure the sustainable flow of resources.

Civil society is not a homogenous sector. Reporting, networking and marketing in well-equipped organisations had more in common with dominant practices in corporate firms and donor agencies than with practices of their “peers” in

civil society. Stephen Ndegwa (1996) showed that Kenyan NGOs were divided according to class, ethnicity and locale and Gerald Clarke (2002) made a related argument for civil society in India. The thesis finds that one important factor differentiating civic organisations was their exact position in administrative networks and their distinct internal administrations. Since technicalities played such a major role in defining NGO work, those organisations with strong internal bureaucracies and consolidated administrative partnerships were in a much better position to survive or even grow than those organisations with weak administrative ties. The thesis therefore questions a presumed natural affinity between distinct NGOs and challenges the idea that NGOs have automatically more in common with their peers than with institutions in other sectors.

### *The consequences of technicalities: NGOs' agency*

The thesis includes important lessons for our understanding of civil society in African development more generally. The division between image and reality of civic activism and the priority given to the sector's day-to-day administration also defines which analytical questions can reasonably be asked to understand the meaning of civil society. The primacy of protocol in civic activism shows that NGOs were agents in their own right but in contexts that were shaped by external demands. Civic organisations were not necessarily mediators between grassroots on the one side and donors and states on the other. They could use their room for manoeuvre between donor demands and state constraints to define their own agenda, but in doing so they had to factor in external constraints and expectations. Analytical questions about NGOs' agency therefore need to explore the factors that influence the ways in which NGOs define their own work.

Managerialism determined NGOs relations with donors, peers and government agencies. Here ideas about proper protocol, about 'accountability and transparency', and about the correct accounting and high profile structured NGOs ideas about proper civic activism. In contrast recipients stood aloof from NGOs' concerns. NGO staff saw civic organisations as distributors of charity to "beneficiaries" whose needs were not seen as location of struggles over the meaning of civic activism. NGO agency was defined by their conviction that they instinctively knew recipients' demands which they regarded as unchanging and unobtainable. They therefore did not see any

potential gap between recipients' requests and their projects' objectives and consequently did not see any need to broker between them (pace Mosse 2006:15). In accordance with NGOs' preoccupation with technicalities they represented any conflict between organisational objectives and recipients' demands as result of faulty implementation and thus as technical shortcoming that could be redressed by an improved administration.

The thesis' findings about NGO agency and their systematic prioritisation of protocol are generally applicable, but other conclusions are arguably specific to a strong state like Namibia. Michael Bratton (1989) has argued that political factors determine whether states are accommodating or hostile to NGOs. The more secure a regime is the more tolerant it seems to be towards NGOs. Echoing this argument NGO staff in Namibia said that working in a democratic stable state meant that civic organisations regarded the government as a partner rather than as threat. However, the thesis also qualifies Bratton's argument by showing that strong states also have increased possibilities to control civil society. The Namibian state delineated the space for civic activism through specific legislation, through particular registration requirements and through its national development plans that determined which projects were eligible for international funding. State agencies also often competed with NGOs for international grants and thus diverted some of civil society's most important source of revenue from the sector. State employment provided a viable and often better paid alternative for NGO staff. This meant that civil society organisations had to constantly compete for professional employees with other sectors that could offer better and more secure terms of employment. This situation is quite exceptional in Africa where NGOs usually offer higher salaries, more benefits and better job prospects compared to local jobs. This qualifies the argument that NGOs provide opportune career choices for ex-civil servants (Mercer 2002: 14).

NGOs concentrate on the technicalities of their work because any proof of organisational action beyond the concrete realm of bureaucracy is so difficult to establish. Their focus on bureaucracy promotes a particularly technocratic understanding of NGOs' role in development and shift struggles over meaning into contestations around technicalities. Civic organisations do thus not simply reflect

dominant development discourses of their environment, but they reformulate and thus actively shape these ideas by administering the everyday in civic activism. Exploring how civil society works rather than assessing whether it works (Mosse 2005: 8) demonstrates that NGO work is locally shaped but organisations constantly redefine the specific meaning of this locale by grappling with the technicalities of doing good.



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### *Appendix I List of Interviews*

Date	Interviewee's position/ Organisation	Location
22/08/ 2002	Social Worker Juvenile Justice Project/Legal Assistance Centre	Windhoek
19/09/2002	AIDS Law Unit Coordinator/Legal Assistance Centre	Windhoek
27/08/2002	ex-Director/Legal Assistance Centre/Legal Assistance Centre,	Windhoek
20/09/2002	Gender Unit Coordinator/Legal Assistance Centre	Windhoek
24/09/ 2002.	Land and Environment Project Coordinator/Legal Assistance Centre,	Windhoek
27/09/ 2002	Librarian/Legal Assistance Centre	Windhoek
26/10/2006	Focus group interview Legal Assistance Centre	Windhoek
6/11/2006	Country Director GTZ	Windhoek
13/11/2006	NGO & HIV/Aids Programme Officer Delegation of the European Commission to Namibia	Windhoek
09/11/2006.	Country Director Konrad Adenauer Stiftung	Windhoek
21/11/2006	Interview Program Officer Embassy of Finland	Windhoek
23/11/ 2006	USAID Country Representative	Windhoek
01/12/2006	Country Director Friedrich Ebert Stiftung	Windhoek
21/05/2008	BWS National coordinator,	Windhoek
10/06/2008	Chairman of the NANGOF Board of Trustees/NANGOF	Windhoek
12/06/2008.	Country Director Project Hope,	Windhoek
24/06/2008	National Coordinator/Namibian Association of CBNRM support organisations	Windhoek
17/07/2008.	Civil Society Help Desk Officer/ National Planning Commission,	Windhoek
18/07/ 2008	Director /Legal Assistance Centre,	Windhoek